銃皇無尽のファフニール

スピリット・ハウリング

Ⅳ

ツカサ
Illustration
梱枝りこ

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つ-3
1-4

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「だから、油断しないで。
簡単に誰かのモノになったら……許さないから」

彼女の言葉と視線に宿った激しい感情に呑まれ、
俺はしばし息を止める。
だが音楽の曲調が変わったことで我に返り、
新しいリズムに合わせてキーリの体を引き寄せた。

「……モノノベ？　え？
ど、どうして……ここ、あたしの部屋だよね？
もしかして――よ、夜這い？」

慌てた様子で部屋の中を見まわした後、顔を真っ赤にするイリス。

「わわ、どうしよ。
あ、あたし、まだ心の準備が――」

イリスの反応を見て、俺まで鼓動が速まってしまう。

「こういうの……私、初めてです」

「いざとなったら……責任を取って王子様になってもらうから」

「べ、別にあなたに褒められても嬉しくなんてありませんわ！」

リーザ・ハイウォーカー
Lisa Highwalker

「ユウ、何だか王子様みたいなの！」

ティア・ライトニング
Tear Lightning

フィリル・クレスト
Firill Crest

物部深月
Mitsuki Mononobe

銃皇無尽のファフニール

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Prologue

I—Mononobe Yuu—have a secret.

Three years ago, to protect my hometown from being destroyed by "Blue" Hekatonkheir, I made a deal with "Green" Yggdrasil.

Because the knowledge of power that Yggdrasil transmitted to me—data regarding weaponry from a lost civilization—was too vast in volume, I lost memories every time I downloaded.

My younger sister Mitsuki would surely feel sad if she found out about this, hence I kept it secret from her, because I did not want to see suffering on Mitsuki's face—

But it was already too late.

I had even forgotten that Mitsuki was not my sister by blood. Even my precious feelings towards her... had been lost.

I am myself. Simply this alone would already hurt Mitsuki. At some point in time, I was already no longer my original self.

And it was actually just now that I finally noticed this myself.

I confessed this secret, which I had kept hidden in my heart until now, never disclosing to anyone at all.

I told the girl who should be the most precious to me currently—Iris Freyja—forcing her to shoulder the heavy burden I could not withstand on my own.

Inside the mildly rocking transport ship, in front of the cabin assigned to me, I embraced Iris tightly as though crying out for help, telling her everything.

I struggled internally, trying my hardest to squeeze out words that sounded like a guilty confession.

Iris silently listened to me.

"Sorry for telling you this kind of thing out of the blue..."

After I finished, I apologized to her with a heavy conscience.

—What am I doing?

Stunned at my own weakness, an intense wave of regret surged in my heart... But time could not turn back.

"Hmm... You told me so much in one go, my mind is totally muddled."

Iris replied to me with a wry smile and wrapped her arms around my back.

Full of chagrin, my heart pounded in response.

"But if there's one thing I definitely felt, it's that you're relying on me, Mononobe, so don't worry!"

Iris separated from me and looked me in the eye squarely.

"This time, it's my turn to help you, Mononobe."

Iris declared with clear determination on her face.

There was not the slightest hesitation in her eyes. She simply focused, staring at me.

"Iris..."

"This isn't something to tell everyone, right? In that case, let's go into the cabin to talk. I want to hear more from you, Mononobe, to think about what should be done."

Thus, we entered my cabin and sat down side by side on a bed, to continue the conversation.

Specifically, she asked me how I lost my memories and why I could not tell others—

Iris asked with an expression of unparalleled seriousness on her face while I answered all her questions honestly.

Finally, she stopped asking questions and the cabin returned to silence.

I saw Iris silently stare at the ceiling for a while before whispering softly:

"For you, Mononobe, falling in love with me... must be the most painful for you."

"No, that's—"

I reflexively tried to deny what she said, but words failed me mid-sentence.

Because Iris was right on target. What made me feel the worst was that I had betrayed my past self—I had betrayed my promise with Mitsuki.

—Even after becoming siblings... I will still love you more than anyone else, Mitsuki, and we will get married when we grow up.

I had apparently made such a vow to Mitsuki during our childhood.

Having forgotten such an important promise, falling in love with Iris, I was no longer the Mononobe Yuu whom Mitsuki knew.

Hence, I could no longer bear it. I felt intense guilt for continuing to pretend to be Mononobe Yuu, which was why I revealed everything.

"Mononobe, you don't need to force yourself to deny it, because even if it's true, I'm still very glad."

"Glad...?"

Unable to understand Iris, I asked her. Iris leaned herself over and rested her head on my shoulder.

"Yes, only because it's the current Mononobe, I feel like doing this... The current Mononobe loves me—This means that our feelings are mutual, right?"

"Well, I guess you're right..."

"Then it's fine. I feel very happy just knowing this alone."

Iris smiled with blushing cheeks, looking up shyly at me.

My guilt-filled heart instantly felt slightly warmer.

"Mononobe, now is not the time to agonize or feel lost. Let's think together about the future."

"The future?"

"Yes, *we must find a way to get your memories back*."

Hearing her say that, my jaw dropped in surprise.

I could not understand. I really could not comprehend how Iris could say this so nonchalantly.

"Are you serious?"

"Eh? Yes, of course I'm serious. Do you think it'll be very hard, Mononobe?"

"No, this isn't an issue of easy or hard... You do realize what it means, right? If by any chance, I retrieve my memories—"

There would be no harsher reality than that, so I was unable to finish my sentence.

But Iris seemed to realize what I wanted to say. She smiled a little sadly.

"I know, then you won't be the current Mononobe anymore... But it's okay, because I've decided to help you, Mononobe."

Iris was making herself very clear. Even if it might mean losing her current happiness, she would still go ahead.

How could she become so strong?

Thinking back, she was like this already from our first encounter. I was never able to understand Iris' style and behavior. Whether in a good sense or a bad sense, she was always beyond my prediction.

Probably because she was so impossible to understand... That was why I fell in love with her.

I stared at Iris' face, mesmerized, only to see her slightly averting her gaze shyly.

"Umm... Although I made such a bold promise, I actually haven't come up with a specific plan, sorry."

"Don't apologize. Thank you. It's the thought that counts."

Although I did not think there was a way to recover my memories, I still thanked her sincerely.

"Oh, but there's one thing bothering me a lot. Although you don't seem concerned about it, I find it quite surprising..."

"What's bothering you that much?"

"Mononobe, you lost your memories because you entered a contract with Yggdrasil, right?"

"Y-Yeah, but that's the unavoidable price—"

I was just about to tell her how massive the information I was forced to download was, but Iris interrupted me. With intense worry, she said:

"Is that really true? I don't think so. Why aren't you wary of Yggdrasil, Mononobe? *That thing* is humanity's enemy... A dragon, you know?"

Chapter 1 - The Dragonslaying Princess

Part 1

"Nii-san, hurry. We are going to be late."

While running along the path from dormitory to the school, my younger sister Mitsuki urged me. With every step, Mitsuki's long black hair would flutter lightly.

"There's still time. Even if we just walk briskly, we'll still make the first bell."

Holding my school bag which contained a laptop-style portable terminal, I answered in a carefree tone of voice.

"As the student body president, how could I serve as the role model for others students if I arrive at school in the nick of time? No matter how late, I must pass through the school gates five minutes early. Otherwise, it is no different from being late."

"In that case, Mitsuki, you'd better run first. I'm still digesting breakfast, so let me walk at my own pace."

Due to oversleeping, I had just finished breakfast in a hurry. Holding my stomach, I replied.

"Unacceptable! Because I am in charge of supervising you, Nii-san, it is my responsibility if you are late, that is why we must run together."

Mitsuki finished then held my hand matter-of-factly.

"H-Hey."

"We are almost there, Nii-san. Hang in there a little longer."

Holding my hand, Mitsuki quickened her pace.

The sensation of slender fingers, a size smaller than mine, made it hard for my emotions to remain calm.

After the Basilisk battle, only a couple days had passed since the transport ship took us back to Midgard.

Chapter 1

Having learned that Mitsuki was not my blood-related sister and listened to her confession of her feelings—I could no longer not notice her.

After Mitsuki declared she would not give up on me, she started to act more proactively, no... More accurately, she had decreased the amount of unnecessary reservations.

Currently, Mitsuki looked very natural. As Midgard's student body president, as my family, she used to adhere rigidly to standards. That kind of life must have been stifling for Mitsuki.

Mitsuki now looked full of vitality. At her urging, I quickened my pace.

Arriving at the intersection between the road to school and the girls dormitories, Mitsuki instantly let go of my hand and switched to a moderate pace. She probably thought that it would be unseemly for the student body president to be rushing through the school gates in a hurry.

But having run all the way up to this point, there was plenty of time to spare now. On the towering clock tower which could be seen from anywhere on the island, the minute hand indicated that there were still fifteen minutes until class.

—The clock tower was already restored to normal. Its broken and tilted state earlier seemed like it had never happened.

Recalling how the top portion had been destroyed and the clock tower was in a state of ruin earlier, I could not help but feel impressed inside.

Roughly a month ago, Midgard had suffered severe damage from Kili and Hekatonkheir but while we were away to put down Basilisk, the clock tower had been repaired for the most part.

Precisely because Midgard was the castle of the Ds who fought dragons, they had finished construction as quickly as they could.

Both Mitsuki's room, originally damaged by Kili's blast, and the gym's roof, which had been wrecked by falling debris, were likewise repaired.

The only lingering signs of destruction were probably the trees trampled by Hekatonkheir.

We swiped our ID cards and passed through the school gates to head to our classroom—Brynhildr Class.

ALong the way, after we entered the school building, I immediately heard someone call my name from behind.

"Yuu—"

I spun around and looked back to see a young girl with tiny horns on her head. Tia Lightning. Her light-colored hair swaying while she ran towards me, the strands of her hair looked pink under the light in a kind of optical illusion.

"Good morning!"

Tia used the momentum from running to jump and hang onto my neck.

"Oh—G-Good morning, Tia."

I caught her light body and greeted her.

"Ehehe, so happy to see Yuu today again."

Tia smiled and clung tightly to my body.

"Tia-san, please do not make excessive displays of intimacy in public."

Mitsuki put on her student body president face to correct Tia, but Tia pouted unhappily.

"Not excessive, this is within normal for Tia."

"In community life, you need to respect common standards more than personal values. Judged according to that, Tia-san, your actions are excessive."

"Hmph... Mitsuki is too strict."

Tia reluctantly let go of me and stared pitifully at me.

"Yuu, if just a little bit, did your heart flutter because of Tia?"

"Huh? Suddenly getting hugged... Of course a little."

Hearing my describe my feelings honestly, Tia happily closed her eyes partially.

"Great, Tia will continue to make Yuu's heart flutter, then Yuu will love Tia the most!"

"Urgh—"

Confronted with her pure and sincere feelings, I could not help but panic.

Ever since returning to Midgard, Tia had been acting this way. Compared to the previous phase when she pleaded like a child for us to get married, she was now courting me as a girl, making it even harder for me to know how to react.

"Nii-san, what are you losing composure for? Okay, let us get to class."

Mitsuki finished with slight displeasure in her tone, then grabbed my hand and dragged me off.

"Ah! So unfair that only Mitsuki gets to hold hands. So that's not excessive?"

"...Because Nii-san and I are family. This level of contact is very normal."

Mitsuki guiltily shifted her gaze away and answered.

"Then Tia will hold hands with Yuu too! Lisa said that comrades in the same class are no different from family."

"Compared to that, the kind of family I am referring to is... Fine, I suppose the two meanings are not entirely dissimilar."

Mitsuki replied ambiguously.

Thinking back now, I had spotted Mitsuki making similar expressions many times before. So actually, Mitsuki had always been conscious that we were not siblings by blood, it was just that I never noticed.

In the end, Mitsuki and Tia held my left and right hands respectively. The three of us made our way to the classroom.

"By the way, Tia, you came to school alone? What happened to Lisa?"

In the beginning when she first transferred here, Tia refused to leave my side, but now that she had opened her heart to her classmates, she was rooming with Lisa Highwalker.

I looked back along the corridor but could not see any signs of Lisa.

"Lisa says she has to talk to Firill, so Tia came to school alone today."

"Talk to Firill? Did something happen?"

What could have happened that required her to ask Tia to go to school first? Feeling curious, I asked.

"Dunno... But Firill seemed a bit strange."

"Strange?"

"She seems distracted... Oh, and she didn't bring a book today."

"That really is quite strange..."

I frowned and nodded.

As a bibliophile, Firill always had a book in her hand. Something definitely seemed wrong... But right now, there was no way to confirm why.

All I could do was wait quietly for Firill to get to school.

Right before entering the classroom, Mitsuki released my hand and opened the door. Three students were already inside.

"Hi, good morning."

Greeting us in a casual tone was the tomboyish girl—Ariella Lu.

"...Mm."

Then greeting us with just a wave of her hand was the redhead, Ren Miyazawa.

"Good morning."

"Morning!"

Mitsuki and Tia greeted while entering the classroom.

"Good morning, Ariella and Ren."

I greeted the two girls then turned my gaze to the remaining girl in the classroom.

"G-Good morning..."

Stammering her greeting was... Iris Freyja.

"Good morning, Iris."

I smiled and replied, but Iris shifted her gaze away from my face after giving Mitsuki a glance.

Even after I sat down next to her, Iris continued to stare out the window. Previously, Iris would always start talking to me frequently on her own, so this felt quite uncomfortable to me.

"...Nii-san, did you get into a fight with Iris-san?"

Seeing us like that, Mitsuki asked me.

"No, that's not it..."

Actually, Iris and I had grown even more intimate after I confessed my memory loss.

However, in direct contrast to Mitsuki who had started behaving more proactively, Iris no longer initiated intimacy with me like when fighting with Tia for my attention, especially when in front of Mitsuki.

She was probably worried about Mitsuki's feelings.

I think that after she heard my confession, having declared she would retrieve my memories, this was the only thing she could do.

Because of the path she had chosen, perhaps in the end, she must give up on "the current me."

Seeing Iris push herself like that, I felt very useless but I did not know what to do. But there was one thing I could be certain. Something seemed to be off about the current situation.

While I was thinking about the correct thing to do, the bell rang for class. Just before the ringing stopped, only then did Lisa and Firill enter the classroom.

Just as Tia said, Firill was not carrying a book in her hand. She looked very preoccupied with her thoughts.

"It will be fine, Firill-san. I shall help you find a solution."

"Lisa... But—"

"Speak no more. Leave it to me."

There was a heavy atmosphere hanging around Lisa and Firill while they talked and took their seats. Then because Shinomiya-sensei, our homeroom teacher, entered immediately, I did not get a chance to talk to them. Sitting in the center of the last row in this 3x3 arrangement of desks and chairs, I could only look at the backs of the the girls who sat on the left and right ends of the front row.

Chapter 1

"Now let's begin with the register."

Including me, Brynhildr Class only had eight students. Although one could tell at a glance who was missing in this small class, Shinomiya-sensei still opened the register and took roll call one by one.

"Lisa Highwalker."

First to be called was Student No. 1, Lisa.

"..."

However, Lisa did not respond straight away. She was staring silently at Firill.

On the other hand, Firill was taking on Lisa's gaze with a lost and hesitant look on her face.

"Lisa Highwalker, are you listening?"

Shinomiya-sensei called her name again. Immediately, Lisa's expression looked like she had made some kind of decision. Turning her gaze away from Firill, she pushed her chair back and stood up.

"Shinomiya-sensei, I have a request for you."

"...You do know that this is homeroom time, right? Save it for later."

"I am terribly sorry but because the matter is of utmost urgency, it cannot be saved for later. Sensei, may I ask that you grant Firill-san permission to exit Midgard as soon as possible?"

Lisa asked Shinomiya-sensei solemnly.

—permission to exit Midgard?

Although I did not know why, this was truly an unreasonable request made all of a sudden. Midgard was both the self-governed organization of Ds—users of dark matter creation—but also an isolation facility at the same time.

Midgard existed both to isolate Ds from all sorts of malevolence as well as to protect ordinary people from getting harmed by Ds.

"What are you suddenly talking about...? You should know that prior to reaching the age of twenty, when powers naturally vanish, Ds are essentially forbidden from leaving Midgard."

Shinomiya-sensei brought up Midgard's rule. Indeed, once arriving in Midgard, Ds must live in this school until they reached adulthood. This decision was chosen to keep friction between them and ordinary people to a minimum, to avoid conflict with the world.

"Of course I know that, but could you make an exception?"

"Do not ask for the impossible. Besides, why on earth—Oh, I see now... Because *he* passed away."

Shinomiya-sensei turned her gaze to Firill and spoke.

"Yes, that is why I would like Firill-san to attend the funeral."

It looked like someone related to Firill had passed away. No wonder she was acting differently from normal, but—

"I understand how you feel... But I cannot allow her to enjoy special treatment as a lone exception."

Shinomiya-sensei's answer was just as I expected. There must be quite a few people who had encountered the same situation so far, but Midgard's rules were not lax enough to allow them to make brief outings for such reasons.

Lisa should understand this very clearly, but still, she refused to give up.

"Shinomiya-sensei, that statement is already wrong on many assumptions. Firill-san is a special case. The Principality of Erlia has made huge contributions to Midgard acquiring the right to autonomy. Even now, they are still major sponsors of Midgard. All things considered, she is their—"

"No matter what position she held outside of Midgard, she is only an ordinary student here. Your line of reasoning does not work."

Shinomiya-sensei interrupted Lisa and told her clearly.

"But—"

"...Lisa, forget it. Thank you... That's enough."

Lisa was about to argue back when Firill stopped her.

"Firill-san..."

"Rules must be followed after all. Sorry, Sensei, I made a willful request."

Firill bowed her head and apologized to Shinomiya-sensei.

"No, wanting to attend a family funeral is a most natural request. I'm the one who feels sorry I cannot agree to your request."

Shinomiya-sensei apologized to Firill while Lisa sat down reluctantly.

Hence, homeroom began under a slightly grave atmosphere. Lisa and Firill had evidently given up on arguing, but there was still one thing I did not understand.

Right now, it was hard for me to speak to Iris, so I asked Mitsuki quietly:

"Mitsuki, what did she mean by Firill being a special case?"

"...Nii-san, do not tell me you still have no idea? Surely you must have heard the name of the Principality of Erlia mentioned in class?"

Mitsuki looked at me with an expression of surprise and lamentation.

"Huh? Oh, of course I know the Principality of Erlia... I remember it's the country that lobbied strongly for the restoration of the Ds' human rights, which led to Midgard's independence, right?"

This name was mentioned frequently in the Ds' modern history class. The Principality of Erlia was a small landlocked country in western Europe. Through the export of scarce resources, they had reportedly achieved astounding economic growth in recent years.

Apparently only Japan, where the birthrate of Ds was the highest, and the Principality of Erlia were the two sponsors of Midgard that far outstripped all other countries.

"Although the Principality of Erlia is a democracy, the royal family has been retained as national symbol. And the one who led the movement pushing for

the restoration of the Ds' human rights was the current king. So, what is his name, may I ask?"

Mitsuki tilted her head slightly with a mischievous look and posed that question to me.

"N-Name? Well, I've forgotten."

"Seriously... How I worry for your next exam if you cannot even remember this. The correct answer is Albert Crest, but unfortunately—He passed away several days ago."

"Crest? I remember that's..."

I had some recollection of this family name. I looked at Firill sitting in the front row.

Following my gaze, Mitsuki nodded affirmatively.

"Yes, she—Firill-san—is the granddaughter of the late King Albert. She is veritably a true princess."

Part 2

—A princess... huh.

During the lunch break, we members of Brynhildr Class went to the cafeteria together. Walking alongside Lisa in front, Firill was still empty-handed. She probably was in no mood for reading still.

The depressed Firill exuded a dreamy impression, making her seem harder to approach than usual. Looking at her now, I could feel an air of nobility in her posture and gait.

—After her grandfather passed away, if her father succeeded to the throne, that would make Firill the king’s daughter.

Princess, the king’s daughter—positions that only appeared in fiction were now presented before my eyes.

It was a strange feeling, lacking in a sense of reality.

"...You've been staring at me for a while now, why?"

She seemed to have noticed me staring at her. Firill slowed down and walked side by side with me.

"Huh? F-Forgive this unworthy peasant."

"Why are you suddenly speaking so deferentially?"

"Oh—I just learned that you're a princess, Firill, so I subconsciously..."

I smiled wryly and replied.

"I see, so you're staring at me because you find princesses very exotic."

Firill asked somewhat sharply.

"Well, I can't deny feeling a bit of that—But what worries me more is that you don't have a book in your hand. That proves that you're really sad, right?"

"Oh..."

Firill stared at her own hands in surprise.

"You only noticed now?"

"...Yes."

Firill nodded gloomily and answered. Now it looked really serious.

"Your grandfather—passed away, right?"

"......Yes, he died, before I could repay him at all."

Firill nodded and murmured quietly.

"Repay?"

Apart from sorrow, her expression conveyed heavy regret as well.

"Grandfather took great pains on my behalf. When he found out I was a D, he said 'How could I allow my granddaughter to be locked away in a some kind of detention facility!?' and threw out the Asgard staff."

"What an amazing grandfather."

Chapter 1

Asgard was the international organization commanding Midgard and NIFL. Its express purpose was to oppose dragons. Rejecting Agard's demands was equivalent to opposing the world.

"However, the rules could not be ignored completely... Hence, after that, Grandfather changed his approach and worked towards making Midgard an appropriate home for me. Hence, he got the entire world involved and started a movement to restore the Ds' human rights... Despite his poor health at the time."

"So, it's all thanks to your grandfather's painstaking efforts that we have the current Midgard..."

Through the export of resources, the Principality of Erlia was very well off financially. Over the years, the Principality had also provided great amounts of financial aid to the various European nations plagued by dragon disasters and economic recessions. Perhaps due to such interactions, the Principality was able to exert widespread influence.

"Right... But I have yet to repaid him at all. At least at the end—I really wish I could have said 'thank you' to Grandfather."

She wanted to say "thank you" rather than "goodbye."

I could feel intense feelings of gratitude in those words of "thank you."

If possible, I wanted to take her to the funeral, to allow her to say those words directly. But I had neither that sort of authority nor that kind of power.

"—Don't worry."

Originally listening to our conversation on the side, Ariella suddenly joined in and asserted in a strong tone of voice.

"Ariella?"

Hearing me call her name, she smiled cheerfully and said:

"No matter where you are, Firill, your thoughts will definitely reach your grandfather's soul."

"...Do souls really exist?"

Firill murmured with a complicated look on her face. She was admittedly happy about Ariella's well wishes, but it was probably impossible for her to accept that notion readily.

"Yes, because I've see them myself."

However, Ariella confirmed without hesitation.

With no idea whether she was serious or not, Firill and I could only stare at each other with troubled looks on our faces.

As soon as we entered the cafeteria, I quickly noticed the unusual mood.

"Did something happen...?"

Mitsuki seemed to notice the same sense of dissonance and looked around.

The air was tense in the cafeteria and abnormally quiet.

"There's a lot of people gathered in the lounge."

Iris pointed at the lounge where a large television was installed.

A memory of watching a Basilisk news report in the lounge flashed across my mind. Did a dragon make a move again?

"Although it doesn't feel like anything good... Let us head over to have a look."

Lisa led the way while we followed.

As soon as we neared the crowd gathered around the lounge, I heard voices from the television.

'—What are your views on the incident?'

'Well... Fundamentally, it's certain that the situation resulted from NIFL doing things by force.'

Judging from the fact that NIFL was mentioned, this did not seem to be a topic irrelevant to us.

I tiptoed slightly to get the television into view. Since all the people in Midgard were girls, my view was not blocked in situations like these.

I could see the newscaster and commentators on the screen, discussion a certain topic.

"Yuu, Tia can't see, please let Tia ride on your shoulders!"

Tia tried to climb on my body from behind. Wrapping her arms around my neck, she choked me.

"C-Can't breathe. I got it, let go first."

To make it easier for Tia to get on my shoulders, I knelt down.

"Thanks!"

Tia thanked me and sat down on my shoulders, clamping my head between her thighs, hugging my head tightly. As for the sensation of fabric against my neck...

"...Eh?"

Discovering the absence of something that should be present, I could not help but exclaim in surprise.

"Yuu?"

Sitting on my shoulders, Tia peered at my face from above with an incredulous expression.

"Tia, I'd like to ask you a question..."

"What is it?"

"Don't tell me... you forgot to wear underwear?"

I asked Tia in trepidation.

"Muu, Yuu, you're so rude. Tia is not the kind of little kid who forgets to wear underwear, because Tia is already a mature lady."

"T-That's true... Sorry for asking you a weird question."

Although there was classmate who really would come to school occasionally without remembering to put on panties despite being the same age, normally speaking, that was impossible. She was an exception in many ways.

"Oh, but Tia's are different today."

Tia seemed to recall something and leaned in closer to whisper in my ear.

"...What's different?"

Seeing Tia wary of getting overheard by Lisa, I whispered back as well.

"Lisa was speaking with Firill the whole time today... and did not prepare a change of clothes for Tia. So Tia went to look for panties alone, but couldn't find any... So Tia borrowed Lisa's to wear."

"What... B-But the size won't match, right?"

"Yeah, so Tia chose the type that's string-tied. It won't fall off if tied tightly."

"S-String!"

I raised my voice involuntarily.

"Wearing her panties without permission, it's bad, right?"

"N-No... It can't be helped in this case, I don't think Lisa will be mad."

Seeing Tia quite worried, I reassured her.

"...Thank goodness."

Tia breathed a sigh of relief but to me, this was a huge problem, because I had to carry Tia on my shoulders but she was wearing the type of underwear that others could mistaken for not wearing any.

—Stop thinking nonsense. I must keep my mind clear, keep my mind clear...

I warned myself not to let my thoughts stray while standing up and holding Tia's legs.

"Wow, so high up!"

Tia cheered but ignoring the sensations around my neck was already taking my full effort.

Just as I finally turned my attention and gaze to the television with much difficulty, the commentators' discussion came to a close.

'Then let us return to the situation at the press conference.'

It looked like they were going to play a news video clip. While talking to Tia just now, I had heard almost nothing of the discussion, but now, I could get a grasp on the situation.

Immediately, the screen switched to show a girl.

"Eh—"

Tia's hoarse voice entered my ears. I gasped in surprise too. The worries about underwear earlier were instantly evicted from my mind.

'I sincerely thank this country for accepting me despite this time of mourning for them.'

Chapter 1

Shown on the television was a girl with long black hair and a prim and proper face. Her intelligent eyes were looking into the camera. I knew clearly who she was.

"Kili..."

Tia called her name in a trembling voice.

Indeed, she was Kili Surtr Muspelheim, the leader of the dragon worshiping cult, the Sons of Muspell. Deemed a disaster, she was also a D that NIFL had targeted for priority elimination.

Roughly a month ago, Kili had disguised herself, taking on the identity Tachikawa Honoka to infiltrate Midgard, intending to take Tia away.

Kili had disappeared without trace after that, so why did she openly make an appearance on television?

The fact that a D was the leader of a terrorist organization was not disclosed to the public, because such news would discredit all Ds if it spread throughout the world.

Hence, the news probably was not reporting on her as a criminal. Then what kind of position exactly was she standing before the cameras of the media?

'I—Kili—am a creator of dark matter. In other words, what everyone calls a D. My position would normally require me to head to the autonomous educational institute of the Ds, Midgard, but due to certain reasons right now, I cannot go to Midgard.'

After listening to Kili's statement, a reporter asked: 'By certain reasons, you mean...?'

Judging from the press conference, Kili was speaking as a D whose powers had awakened, rather than as a terrorist.

'Because NIFL might very well interfere during the process of transportation to Midgard. Until the very end, this NIFL organization opposed Midgard's independence. Even now, when the Ds' human rights have been restored, NIFL still regards us as monsters. I really cannot trust them. Rumor has it—They secretly filter the Ds sent to Midgard... Has anyone heard of this rumor?'

Gathered around Kili, the reporters clamored while cameras flashed nonstop.

'Of course, I don't know if it's true or not. But ever since I started investigating the veracity of this rumor, I've heard several times about the disappearance of Ds. I wouldn't hand myself over to that kind of organization for even a second.'

Gathered around the television, Midgard's students were whispering among themselves.

I heard someone say stuff like "I knew it..."

'But protected by the secure defenses of Midgardsormr, Midgard is in a state of isolation from the outside world without any direct way of reaching them. As a commoner, even trying to contact them is impossible. Hence, I can only rely on this country.'

Kili spoke gravely to the camera:

'Considering the Principality of Erlia that had rejected Asgard and NIFL's demands in the past, concealing their princess who had awakened as a D—I believe they will guarantee my safety if I make such a suggestion.'

"Principality of Erlia...?"

Hearing that name, I looked for Firill who should be nearby. She was completely still, staring intently at the image on the television.

'I hope to be transported directly from the Principality of Erlia to Midgard without going through Asgard or NIFL. If Ds come directly to pick me up, I will be able to hand myself over to them without worry. I hereby request—Please save me.'

Kili bowed deeply with her head down. Then the camera switched scenes.

Inside the recording studio, the commentators began another round of discussion. However, I almost did not register any of their opinions.

"What on earth is going on?"

Kili's goal was completely incomprehensible. For a long time now, Kili had persisted in evading NIFL's pursuit. If it was her, there was no need to seek

any side's protection, right? Even if she had some goal requiring her to infiltrate Midgard again, doing it this way would attract way too much attention.

Considering her ability to perform biogenic transmutation, turning herself into a totally different person would be a more practical method.

"Apart from us, no one seems to notice she is Honoka-san..."

Lisa whispered after observing the nearby students.

Indeed, everyone was fervently discussing whether what they just saw was real or not, or whether Midgard would tak e any action. None of them seemed to have realized her identity. Although it was common knowledge by now that Honoka was a terrorist who had infiltrated Midgard, her name being Kili was not disclosed to ordinary students.

When infiltrating as Tachikawa Honoka, she had glasses and was wearing her hair in braids. Despite looking the same, she gave off a completely different impression, which was probably why people failed to associate Honoka with Kili.

Disguised as Honoka, she was timid, quiet and gentle, but in the video, she was completely unafraid and quite outgoing in tone.

"What is she doing... in my country? I must hurry and inform Father and the others of her true identity—"

Firill spoke with anxiety.

"I understand how you feel, but please calm down a bit. If you act recklessly, it could endanger your parents."

Mitsuki placed her hand on Firill's shoulder and cautioned her.

"Kili's strength is enough to oppose NIFL's army. Based on this fact, this is the same as taking Firill's country itself hostage..."

I remarked with deep worry.

If the truth was revealed, forcing the Principality of Erlia to make Kili an enemy, she would probably eliminate all threats mercilessly.

"No way... What should I do...?"

"—It seems that we will be deciding what to do straight away."

Taking out her portable terminal, Mitsuki showed us the screen. Shinomiya-sensei was calling for her.

"Then I shall head over to the conference. Nii-san, everyone, please have lunch first."

Saying that, Mitsuki swiftly left the catering building.

"Yuu..."

Sitting on my shoulders, Tia hugged my head tightly.

Tia had been subjected to Kili's brainwashing education before. The pair of horns on her head were also given to her by Kili through biogenic transmutation. And her parents' murderer was also—

"Don't worry, although it's unknown what Kili's goal is... I don't think she wants to take you away like before, because we already defeated Basilisk."

"...Really?"

"Yeah. Even if you're her target, Tia, I'll still protect you, so don't worry."

I reached out and stroked Tia's head.

"Yeah... Then Tia is relieved."

Tia relaxed her body as though breathing a sigh of relief.

"..."

On the other hand, Firill showed a stiff expression on her face while staring at the next news report. With her grandfather's passing and her home country in danger, it was only natural for her to feel unsettled.

However, I could not offer comforting words irresponsibly without understanding the situation.

The problem was how Midgard would choose to react.

And the only student involved in that decision was Mitsuki as the student body president.

—Mitsuki, I'm counting on you.

Believing in my non-blood-related younger sister, I prayed that she could point out a better path.

Even after the bell rang for afternoon classes, Mitsuki still had not returned. Charlotte B. Lord showed up as the substitute teacher to cover Periods 5 and 6.

The principal's childish appearance meant that she did not look out of place standing among the students. She looked especially happy to be teaching. Although she did not look any older than us in appearance, rumor had it that she was already on this island since Midgard's inception, hence her age likely did not match her appearance.

"—When a D is targeted by a dragon and her dragon mark changes color, she will turn into the same type of dragon just by making contact with the dragon. All of you should know this already. But according to the latest research, a D's dragonification might be brought about by the dark matter generated from her own body."

It was supposed to be History class right now, but she was proudly talking about the latest D research while dressed in a loose-fitting lab coat. Every time she jumped to point out something projected on the blackboard, her blonde hair fluttered lightly behind her.

She mentioned she had a medical license when I received a health examination from her last time, so perhaps her main job was being a researcher.

"This hypothesis means that a D might be using her own dark matter to perform biogenic transmutation to take on a dragon's form. But here's the problem now. A human brain does not have sufficient specs to control and process biogenic transmutation—"

This was a very interesting topic, so I had no complaints.

However, I wondered: Was it really okay for Midgard's chief administrator to be spending time in this kind of place?

Essentially, I asked her in the beginning, doesn't the principal need to attend the meeting? But she said "since Haruaka is Midgard's commander, that's her job. I'm just the principal."

"Any deficit must be made up somewhere. Most likely during a D's dragonification, a powerful link is formed with the dragon's brain, thereby conferring massive processing power. There is also evidence that a D can feel the dragon's consciousness when her dragon mark changes color. Such testimonies also lend support to this hypothesis."

Saying that, the principal turned her gaze to Iris and Tia. They had been targeted by dragons separately and had sensed the thoughts of dragons.

"Excuse me..."

Lisa raised her hand at this moment.

"Yes, what is it? Do you have a question?"

The principal asked Lisa in delight.

"Yes, although I find this hypothesis very compelling... It does raise the question, how is Kili Surtr Muspelheim able to use biogenic transmutation?"

Lisa's question was only natural, because we had witnessed with our own eyes how she used biogenic transmutation to heal her wounds instantly.

Lisa probably recalled that incident after seeing Kili just now.

"Well, there are two kinds of possibilities."

However, the principal raised two fingers and spoke.

"Two kinds?"

"Yes. One is that she is also using some method to supplement her processing power. The other is that she is not human to begin with."

"Not human...? Are you saying that she might not even be a D?"

Lisa exclaimed in surprise but the principal nodded with a nonchalant expression.

"Assuming that without external aid, she is capable of things that are beyond you Ds—That implies she is a different lifeform. She supposedly claimed to be a dragon and I would not be surprised even if that were true."

The principal remarked calmly.

Thinking logically, this was the natural conclusion. But for us, who had thought of Kili as simply a D the whole time, we were rendered instantly rendered speechless.

Chapter 1

Inside the classroom where you could hear a pin drop, the bell rang to announce the end of the period.

"Oh, it's time. What a delightful lesson, with the gazes of beautiful maidens gathered upon me, time sure flies."

The principal spoke in a wistful tone of voice. That seemed to be the reason why she was in a good mood.

"—As much as I'd like to continue, that's it for today's lessons. Dismissed."

"Y-Yes. Please stand, everyone."

Since Mitsuki was not present, Lisa took on the role of issuing orders.

"Bow."

"Bye."

The principal started walking and was about to exit the classroom when she stopped before opening the door and looked back at me.

"Mononobe Yuu, come over here. I've got business with you."

"Okay, got it..."

I wondered what it was about while following the principal to the corridor.

"Show me your dragon mark."

Hearing that, I instantly understood the principal's intent.

"—There's nothing unusual."

I showed the back of my left hand where the dragon mark was located while I spoke.

The small wound that had appeared after Leviathan's defeat was now part of my dragon mark.

Since I had gained the ability to create antigravitational matter after the wound appeared, the principal was suspecting a causal relationship between the two.

"Hmm... That seems to be the case. Then has there been any changes in your powers? Are you able to perform new transmutations?"

Stroking my dragon mark with her fingertip, the principal asked.

"None so far..."

"I see. It'd be interesting if you became capable of emulating Basilisk. But since it hasn't been that long since the team defeated Basilisk, perhaps the change will occur later. Report to me instantly if you discover anything."

"Yes."

I nodded affirmatively and the principal instantly turned her gaze to the door of Brynhildr Class.

"Antimatter and mithril was obtained from Kraken while antigravitational matter was obtained from Leviathan. In each battle against the dragons, Ds would gain new powers after victory. This time should be no exception. Apart from you, there could be changes in the others, so you must pay extra attention."

"...Creating new matter unintentionally is very dangerous. I'll be careful."

A suddenly obtained power could go out of control or cause accidents. Hence, I must pay attention and not miss minute symptoms.

"Great, then finally—Could you crouch down slightly."

"Huh? Like this... Is that okay?"

I had no idea what the principal wanted but I still bent down and lowered my posture.

Immediately, the principal placed her hand on my head.

"Mononobe Yuu, you did excellent work. It's all thanks to your contributions that Basilisk could be taken out successfully without sacrificing a single person."

It felt quite embarrassing to have her tiny hand rubbing my head.

"P-Principal, what are you doing so suddenly—"

"Hmm? I'm praising you... You're unhappy with this level of praise?"

"No, I'm not unhappy at all..."

"Then accept it with gratitude. It's extremely rare for me to personally reward a man."

After ruffling my hair for a while, the principal smiled and left.

I returned to the classroom. In the middle of packing their belongings, my classmates all stared speechlessly.

"...Mononobe-kun, your hair is such a mess, fufu... It's so weird."

Having worn a gloomy expression all day, Firill chuckled.

Seeing her smile, I felt somewhat thankful for the principal's reward.

Perhaps getting stroked on the head was not a bad thing once in a while.

Part 3

Located some distance from the girls dormitories was a dorm belonging to Mitsuki alone. My accommodations consisted of a room in that building.

Normally, we would have our meals together in the dining hall at seven in the morning and the evening, but today, Mitsuki still had not returned when dinner time came.

Alone, I ate the meal prepared by the housework robots—the auto-maids—then returned to my own room.

After finishing my daily muscle training in my room, I took a shower and just as I was getting sleepy, I got received a message. My portable terminal showed an icon for incoming mail and rang.

'Please come to conference room number one on the first floor of the clock tower immediately.'

The sender was Mitsuki. The email only contained the brief instructions above.

—Head over to school at this hour?

This was surely about handling Kili, right? But why ask me to come over?

Despite not knowing the reason, I still followed instructions and made my way to school.

Although everything was shrouded under the canopy of the night sky, the stars were bright and it was not difficult to find my way.

The school's clock tower, visible from everywhere on the island, was still brightly lit.

I used my portable terminal for identification to get past the gates, then entered the silent campus. Since the usual entrance to the clock tower from the corridor was closed, I entered through the back door

"Conference room number one... That's here, right?"

I looked at the room signs and walked. After finding my destination, I opened the door.

"—You arrived at last. How slow, Mononobe Yuu."

I felt troubled to be suddenly greeted by Lisa's glare, only to see that all of Brynhildr Class had already gathered.

"Nii-san, hurry and take a seat."

Standing in front of the whiteboard, Mitsuki urged me to sit down. Next to her was Shinomiya-sensei while the others were already seated.

"Yuu! Over here!"

Hearing Tia called me, I took the seat next to her.

"Tia, all of you were called here?"

"Yes, we've been waiting for Yuu the whole time."

Since Mitsuki's dorm was farther away than the girls dorms, it looked like everyone ended up waiting for just me.

I looked around the room and met gazes with Iris, who was sitting diagonally in front of me on the right.

"Good evening, Mononobe."

"O-Oh... Good evening."

Iris greeted me shyly in a quiet voice and I replied nervously.

Lisa and Firill were sitting in the front row. Ren was sprawled on the table napping while Ariella shook her shoulder.

"—Looks like everyone is here. Then I will start the announcements. Ren Miyazawa, time to wake up."

Shinomiya-sensei took a step forward whereas Mitsuki retreated to the side.

"Mm..."

Ren rubbed her eyes and looked up.

"Sorry for summoning you at this hour. Although it is very sudden, I would like you all to set off for the Principality of Erlia at 0600 tomorrow."

"What—?"

I was not the only one exclaiming in surprise. Everyone was staring speechlessly at Shinomiya-sensei.

"Currently staying in the Principality of Erlia, Kili Surtr Muspelheim is seeking Midgard's protection and demands to be picked up by Ds. Hence, I have selected you as the pickup team."

After saying that, Shinomiya-sensei looked at each of us in turn.

"Mononobe Yuu and Lisa Highwalker have combat experience against her. Tia Lightning has a long and involved history with her. Mononobe Mitsuki is the captain of the Counter-Dragon Squad whereas Firill Crest is a princess from the Principality of Erlia. Given such a talented group, I believe that Brynhildr Class is the most suited to carrying out this mission."

"H-Hold on! Shinomiya-sensei, are you implying she will be admitted into Midgard again!?"

Lisa asked loudly with disbelief.

It was only natural for her to be worried. Kili had caused serious destruction in Midgard. Welcoming someone like her would be suicidal behavior.

"I know what you are trying to say. However, since her message has been broadcast widely across the entire world, Midgard has no choice but to respond humanely."

"But she's a terrorist, right!?"

"All Ds will be discredited if she were to be exposed as a terrorist. Having covered up their crimes so far, NIFL probably won't disclose the identity of a deemed disaster either. In other words—We cannot treat her as a criminal."

"E-Even so... I still don't agree that this is the correct response."

Lisa argued desperately. Precisely because Lisa cherished her friends more than anyone—cherishing them as family—she could not allow a dangerous person to enter Midgard.

"Yes, it is definitely not the correct response. But to the outside world, we can only act in this manner, then adjust afterwards."

"Afterwards...?"

"Yes, meaning after we take her out of the Principality of Erlia. You will tell her that we will put many restrictions on her freedom if she is to live in Midgard. If she does not accept, you will let her go on the condition that her being a deemed disaster will not be disclosed."

"Restrictions on freedom is an appropriate measure... But is it really okay to let her go if negotiations break down?"

Lisa frowned and asked.

"Midgard is an organization that protects Ds. Even if she is deemed a disaster, we have neither reason nor obligation to kill her. More importantly, I cannot allow any of you to commit murder."

Hearing Shinomiya-sensei's answer, Lisa could not help but fall silent.

To commit murder—Such was the weight behind those words.

"I will continue if there are no other questions. Although Ds are forbidden from stepping out of Midgard's territorial waters, for this special exception, you are granted a five-day exemption. We will use this period to travel to the Principality of Erlia and make contact with Kili Surtr Muspelheim."

"Shinomiya-sensei, I think that kind of duration seems too long for simply transporting Kili."

The five-day exemption bothered me so I raised my hand and asked.

"Indeed, there are grounds for that. Starting the day after tomorrow, the Principality of Erlia will hold a grand funeral for King Albert for three days. And she has openly told the media that she would participate in a flower offering ceremony on the last day, so we will transport her only after the funeral. Before that, I want your team to serve as her bodyguards."

"Bodyguards... Really?"

"NIFL will likely target her life, but while she is staying in the Principality of Erlia, she is purely a D trying to seek help. At least until we negotiate with her, we must not allow her to be killed."

If Kili was treated as a D, Midgard was duty-bound to protect her. I understood this principle quite well, but—

"That Kili... I don't think she needs bodyguards."

Recalling her powerful abilities, I remarked. If killing her was the objective, that would be a separate matter, but in normal combat, she was definitely stronger than me.

"Even so, unexpected things will always come up. Hence, I am counting on you, Mononobe Yuu."

Judging from the way Shinomiya-sensei worded things, the one actually performing bodyguard duties was probably me. I understood this too, because what we needed to guard against were humans. As a former soldier of NIFL, there was no better candidate than me, but... I still felt quite worried.

"...I understand."

Still, giving anyone else this task would be too dangerous. Hence, I sighed and gave up on resisting. Reluctantly, unwillingly, I accepted the job.

After detailed explanations on the itinerary, we were dismissed roughly an hour later.

"We are setting off early tomorrow, so we must hurry and get ready... Nii-san, may I trouble you to pack my luggage for me?"

"No problem, leave it to me."

I nodded to Mitsuki and left the conference room together.

I never expected we would leave Midgard again so soon after defeating Basilisk.

Although it was a journey to foreign lands—I could not feel excitement stirring in my heart.

Feeling that what awaited us was a future impossible to imagine, I wiped my sweaty palms on my clothing.

Part 4

At 6am the next morning, led by Shinomiya-sensei, all members of Brynhildr Class departed from Midgard.

First, we took a large high-speed helicopter for several hours to reach an airport somewhere. Then from there, we transferred to a private jet that we had hired.

I slept on the plane. By the time I woke up from an inflight announcement, the sunlight streaming through the window was already the setting sun's glow.

'All travelers—Our plane is set to arrive at the destination in roughly ten minutes.'

Despite having spent almost twenty-hours traveling, the time was still only dusk. This place most likely had a seven to eight hour time difference with Midgard.

Chapter 1

I felt weight on my shoulder. Sitting in the neighboring seat, Mitsuki was sleeping with her head resting on my shoulder. Judging from the fact that the announcement had no woken her up, she must have accumulated quite a lot of fatigue.

Thinking I should let her sleep longer as much as possible, I looked outside the window without rousing her.

The plane still seemed to be high in the sky. I could see layers of clouds, dyed orange-red by dusk, covering the distant ground in patches. Protruding from the clouds was a towering mountain range with snow-capped peaks.

"It's all mountains."

"...Because that's the characteristic of the Principality of Erlia."

Firill suddenly poked her head out from the seat in front.

"Woah!?"

Her explanation came unexpectedly, making me exclaim quietly in surprise. She had apparently heard my mutterings.

"Let me tell you, because the Principality of Erlia is surrounded by tall mountains, it's known as the "Landlocked Island" and methods of transportation to the outside world are very limited."

"I had heard that they relied on planes as the chief mode of transportation... But to such an extent?"

"Yes, all land routes basically have to cross mountains. Although there are rivers passing through the mountain range, the rapids only allow one-way traffic exiting the country. Until the airport's construction, it was totally an isolated country."

Firill pointed at the land visible outside the window and explained.

"Actually... Before gaining independence during the chaos after World War II, it was not even a country—simply a part of a large nation's territory. Prior to my great-grandfather, my ancestors were dukes, not kings."

"Ah, so that's why it's called a principality rather than a kingdom."

I remarked in comprehension.

"Indeed. The Crest family has ruled this region for centuries but only started the royal administration not too long ago."

Firill seemed especially excited and talkative, perhaps due to getting close to her homeland.

"I see. So it's currently a democracy?"

I remember Mitsuki mentioning that.

"When Grandfather succeeded the throne, he voluntarily gave up power and opened up state-owned land to the people to extract rare resources... This made the country extremely rich. Grandfather really was an amazing person."

"Apart from that, he was also involved in restoring the Ds' human rights as well as Midgard gaining independence, right? How should I put it...? He is a man who changed countries and the world."

I sincerely admired the accomplishments of Firill's grandfather.

Simply as a single human, he had revolutionized so much. This fact was astounding enough already.

"Yes, everyone respects Grandfather."

"Then I'm sure the Principality's citizens must be very sad..."

I imagined the entire country to be shrouded in sorrow, but for some reason, Firill laughed as though she found it funny.

"I think the citizens will be sad... But definitely, it won't be like what you're imagining, Mononobe-kun."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll know when you see it."

Firill smiled mischievously.

'—Our flight is about to land, please secure your seat belts.'

Another announcement was heard in the plane.

"Once we arrive, I'll take you all to go sightseeing. Mitsuki, time to wake up."

Firill reached out and poked Mitsuki's cheek. Then she retracted her head and sat properly on her own seat.

"Mmm... Nii-san?"

Mitsuki rubbed her eyes sleepily. I told her we were about to arrive while pondering what Firill meant by "You'll know when you see it."

As soon as we exited the plane, I felt cold wind against my face instantly.

"Woah... S-So cold..."

"Mm..."

Ariella and Ren hunched up and rubbed their exposed arms.

"I would have worn thicker clothing had I known earlier..."

Carrying Tia on her back, Lisa exited the plane, speaking with a frown.

On Lisa's back, Tia was soundly asleep, refusing to wake up no matter how much we called to her.

I descended the gangway while looking at the scenery afar. Just as Firill had mentioned, there was a mountain range faintly visible in the distance, enclosing the entire region. The altitude felt quite high too for the air was cold and rarefied.

This was quite a harsh environment for us, coming from a tropical island.

"Wow, so cool and refreshing!"

Iris was taking deep breaths comfortably despite exhaling white mist. Speaking of which, I had never asked where she was from. Perhaps Iris had grown up in a cold country.

As soon as I descended the gangway, I saw an extra long luxury vehicle—probably a stretch limousine—parked before us. It looked like the car had

driven directly on the runway to welcome us. Standing next to the car was a woman in a heavy coat.

"Oh!"

Firill instantly rushed down the gangway the instant she saw the woman.

"P-Princess Firill—That is very dangerous!"

"Helen!"

Ignoring the voice telling her to stop, Firill rushed over and hugged the woman.

As soon as we descended the gangway, Firill instantly turned around to face us and introduce her to us.

"—She is Helen, my lady-in-waiting. She used to be my wet nurse during my infancy too."

"My name is Helen Brown. Dressed like that, you must all be cold. Please hurry and get in the car. I will prepare warm clothing for all of you once we reach the palace."

"Thank you. It is a pleasure to meet you."

Mitsuki walked up and bowed to her.

We boarded the vehicle at Helen-san's urging. The heat was on inside the and it was very warm. The interior of the limousine was very spacious with two rows of seats facing each other. After we had settled into our seats, the limo immediately started moving smoothly. Helen-san was the driver.

"—Well then, let's briefly confirm our schedule from here on. Ah, before that, synchronize your timepieces. The time is currently 1823 in this country."

Shinomiya-sensei revealed her radio-controlled watch. After making sure we had all checked our watches or portable terminals with it, she continued:

"Next, we will be welcomed at the palace as state guests. The palace will prepare individual rooms for us. You will get ready in your rooms to attend the dinner party at 2000. During the party, you will probably meet Firill Crest's

parents—the next king and queen—as well as Kili Surtr Muspelheim, of course."

Someone gulped.

Meeting *that* Kili again—The thought of that instantly dispelled any uplifting feeling of trip abroad.

Since there was no telling what Kili's goal was, nothing could be predicted. If Kili intended to harm someone, we would need to fight her. And in order to stop her, my only choice was to fight her with the intention of killing her.

"The schedule for tomorrow and beyond will be adjusted after we talk to her. Any questions?"

Shinomiya-sensei asked and swept her gaze across our faces.

"Well..."

With the Tia sound asleep, using her lap as a pillow, Lisa raised her hand and spoke hesitantly.

"What is it?"

"How should we face Honoka-san—rather, how should we face Kili?"

"I won't ask you to be friends with her, but for the sake of finding out her goal, please try to talk to her as much as possible. Naturally, I am referring to peaceful and cordial communication. However, do not lower your guard the slightest. In a dangerous situation, please prioritize your own safety when taking action."

"...Understood."

Despite a worried look, Lisa still nodded affirmatively.

The conversation ended there. I turned my gaze outside the window, only to see the limo leaving the airport runway. Passing through the terminal at the front of the airport, the limo drove along a street lined with many large hotels.

Perhaps because it was next to the airport, the street scenery looked unexpectedly modernized. Because I was told that this country was remote

and isolated by mountains, I thought the scenery would be more agricultural and countryside.

But before long, brick buildings with distinctive styles became abundant. This seemed to be an area consisting mostly of historic buildings.

Vendor stalls were lined along the sides of the road with huge crowds moving about. I looked out the window during a red light and saw people decorating buildings and the street with electric illumination and colored fabric.

"Looks especially—lively."

Seeing the situation inside of town, I muttered in puzzlement. Clearly the king had died but I could not sense any mourning.

"Yes, because the festivities start tomorrow."

Seeing my reaction, Firill smiled while she spoke, sitting opposite me.

"Eh? Isn't it the king's funeral starting tomorrow?"

"In this country, funerals are the same as festivals. Our custom is to send the deceased off to heaven in a lively celebration."

After the sun set in the western mountains, the city's neon lights were lit. Staring out at the dazzling lights, Firill explained.

"I get it now... So that's why you said earlier I'll know when I see it."

"It will definitely be more fun-filled starting tomorrow, but I fear that person might do something nefarious."

Gloom flashed across Firill's expression. She likely meant Kili by "that person." Firill was probably the most worried person here. After all, her parents had unknowingly taken in a dangerous terrorist.

"Don't worry. As long as I'm here, I absolutely won't allow Kili to do whatever she wants."

I was very worried too but I still had to assert this, because rather than being a question of whether I could do it or not, it was something I must do. Even if Kili had any ulterior motives, I was not going to let sadness or harm come to Firill.

"Mononobe-kun, you're quite reliable sometimes."

"'Sometimes' is redundant."

"Fufu."

Hearing my reply, Firill laughed happily.

Then feeling strong gazes at this moment, I followed them to their source.

For some reason, Mitsuki and Iris were staring coldly at me.

"W-What?"

"Nothing, none at all."

Mitsuki answered, her words inexplicably prickly.

"Mononobe... Somehow without me knowing it, you've become such good friends with Firill-chan."

Iris remarked with a slight sulk.

"N-No, that's not—"

"...We aren't?"

Looking at my face, Firill's question put me at a loss for words.

"Perhaps... I guess it's not entirely..."

In the process of resolving the conundrum between Mitsuki and Iris, I had many opportunities to interact with Firill. It was true that we had become much better friends than before.

"...It must be true, becaue we did *this* and *that* together."

Firill leaned forward, drew near my face and whispered in my ear.

"Urgh..."

My ears began to feel hot while memories flashed across my mind of how she was touching my body randomly while straddling me on a bed or pressing her bosom against my back in the hot spring.

"Nii-san, do you know that your face is very red?"

"Mononobe... Did something happen between you and Firill-chan?"

Mitsuki and Iris' stares turned even sharper.

"N-Nothing at all! Putting that aside, look, that store's decorations are so pretty—"

I was trying to change the subject forcibly when I stopped mid-sentence.

From among the thick crowds in the street, I sensed an intense stare directed at us.

"What is the matter...? Nii-san?"

I was brought back to reality by Mitsuki calling to me.

However, the scenery rapidly receded into the distance. Trying to find the person staring at us was no longer possible.

"—No, I was just mesmerized by the lovely scenery."

It was probably hard not to be the subject of envy while traveling in this luxury vehicle. Or perhaps, Ds out of Midgard were under surveillance...

Although I could think of many possibilities, since no conclusion could be reached, I vaguely covered things up.

Part 5

The limo passed through ancient streets then started crossing a large bridge. The surface of a vast lake was reflecting the setting sun's lingering glow. Looking ahead where the car was going, I saw a brightly lit castle come into view.

Surrounded by tall walls of stone. Countless spires towered.

"...How spectacular. Is that castle the royal palace?"

I asked Firill but she shook her head.

"No, that's Erlia Castle, a World Heritage tourist site. Nowadays, it's only used for special ceremonies."

"I see, so where's the palace?"

"Over on the side, we'll be there soon."

After the limo crossed the bridge, it continued on a road along the castle walls then accelerated. There were no cars coming in the opposite direction and no pedestrians visible either.

Just as Firill had said, a building resembling a palace quickly came into view.

A towering and magnificent palace was adjacent to the castle. Without castle walls and watch towers for defending against invaders, it was less intimidating than the castle, but it still exuded an air of history and grandeur. Its gothic architectural style indicated that the palace was built more recently than the castle.

After passing through the heavily secured main gate where many guards were stationed, crossing a spacious garden, the limo stopped at a side door instead of the front of the palace.

"—It feels like we're sneaking in even though the princess is clearly returning in triumph. We didn't go through official immigrations at the airport either..."

Ariella muttered after she got off the car, looking at the unassuming side door.

"I asked them beforehand not to publicize our visit, because it might cause unnecessary troubles if people found out that several Ds were outside of Midgard."

Shinomiya-sensei answered Ariella's question while waiting for everyone to exit the vehicle.

Carrying Tia, Lisa was the last to alight. Helen-san then led us into the palace.

"Well then, I shall first take you to your rooms."

After stepping into the palace through the side door, I instantly felt myself surrounded by warm air.

The interior had been modernized. The air conditioning was warm and gentle. Perhaps this was supposed to be a corridor used by servants, there were no extravagant furniture or interior decorations.

But as soon as we reached the third floor by the stairs, the impression was much different. The lights on the ceiling had complicated carvings while the floor was covered by a soft velvet carpet.

Helen-san led us to where there were many rooms spaced at regular intervals. Reaching into her pocket, she took out a notebook.

"Shinomiya Haruka-sama, please use this room."

Reading her notebook, Helen-san pointed at the room beside her and opened the door. The rooms were apparently all allocated already.

"Clothes have already been prepared inside the rooms, please use them as you please. The sizes are based on what you provided in advance, but we will prepare alternatives if none prove to be to your liking."

After explaining fluently, Helen-san took us to our respective rooms in order.

The rooms seemed to be assigned according to Student No. essentially.

The only exceptions were Tia rooming with Lisa and Firill getting skipped over.

"Now then, please come with me, Princess Firill."

Called last, she most likely had her own room.

Hence, Firill and Helen-san walked towards the other end of the corridor together.

—A princess' room must be very grand.

Although I felt a bit curious, it was not like I could head over for a peek, so my only choice was to enter my room obediently.

"Wow..."

Since the doors were spaced quite far apart, I already expected it to some extent. However, the luxurious room before my eyes turned out to be even more spacious than I had imagined.

The ceiling had a chandelier as one would expect. The bed in the room was also especially huge. I opened the closet standing on the side of the wall and saw a large amount of menswear made with top-quality fabric and designs.

The windows seemed to open up to a balcony. I tried to open the windows gently and cold wind immediately blew into the room. Although it felt a bit cold since I had not changed yet, I still tried walking in the balcony.

The sun had completely set by now. The stars were twinkling in the sky. Perhaps due to the altitude, the stars looked nearer than usual.

I turned my gaze to the ground and could see a vast garden, meticulously maintained. It did not look like the front garden we saw when the car came in. It was the courtyard that was not visible from outside the palace. There was a fountain in the center. I could hear the sound of flowing water.

—Clack.

I heard someone open a window. Since Tia and Lisa were rooming together, the room on my right was empty while the left one was Iris', which meant that—

I spun left to have a look and instantly met eyes with Iris on the adjacent balcony. Our balconies were not connected. Although there was a gap separating them, there was no partition to block our view.

"Oh..."

Iris showed a slightly surprised look then smiled.

"We think alike, Mononobe."

Iris smiled happily. Leaning out from her balcony, Iris extended her hand towards me.

"H-Hey, that's dangerous, you know?"

"Come—Extend your hand too, Mononobe."

"...?"

Although I had no idea what was the point of doing that, I did as told.

Our fingertips touched slightly.

"Ah, we're touching."

Iris smiled with a happy voice.

"...Yeah, just barely. Then what do you want to do?"

"Hmm? Nothing, it just occurred to me how glad I'd feel if we were able to touch."

Iris widened her eyes and answered.

"Glad...?"

"For our hands to be able to touch when we're clearly in different rooms, doesn't that set your heart racing?"

"Hmm... Not really."

It was hard for me to imagine because such romantic notions did not occur to me.

"Eh, but I already feel my heart racing..."

Iris glared at me unhappily. Hearing her upfront confession, I felt my heart rate accelerate. Perhaps as a backlash to keeping her distance when Mitsuki was around, Iris was now expressing her feelings without any hesitation.

"...Heart racing huh."

Hearing me repeat those words, Iris blushed.

"R-Right..."

Iris scratched her cheek shyly.

Silently, we gazed at each other for a while. Then a strong gust of cold wind blew.

"Kyah!?"

Iris' skirt was lifted up by the blowing wind.

My heartbeat accelerated. For an instant, my gaze was drawn to the exposed white fabric.

".....Did you see it?"

Iris frantically held down her skirt and asked me.

"S-Sorry."

Covering up was impossible after all, so I apologized honestly.

Then Iris seemed to breathe a sigh of relief for some reason and touched her chest gently.

"Ah... Luckily, I'm wearing panties today."

"That's what you're concerned about?"

I could not help but ask her that. Iris smiled embarrassedly.

"Because... Mononobe, you mentioned before that seeing panties is like feeling you profited. It's embarrassing for me, but if it makes you happy, Mononobe, then it's not a failure to me, oh... Or are you unhappy to see panties?"

"Uh, nothing of that sort..."

"Then there's no problem!"

Seeing Iris smile sweetly, I could not help but nod in agreement.

"I guess..."

Another strong gust of wind blew, forcing me to shiver. Iris held down her skirt as well. It looked like she felt really cold.

"—It's time we get back into our rooms to change. Staying outside in these clothes is uncomfortable."

"Y-Yeah..."

Shivering, Iris nodded and walked back to the window.

"Mononobe, see you later! Since there are lots of wonderful clothes, you should look forward to it!"

Saying that, Iris closed her window and drew the curtains.

With embarrassed feelings, I returned to my room too. Speaking of which, I had yet to turn on the light.

Hence, I pressed the switch near the entrance. Immediately, the chandelier lit up and the room became bright.

The time was just after 7pm. I walked to the closet to pick out my clothing for the dinner party.

But at that moment, my portable terminal rang.

It was an incoming call but there was no caller ID, which gave me a bad feeling. No, I was certain already.

The same had happened before. Capable of concealing his caller ID, making calls to my Midgard-issued portable terminal, there was only one person I could think of.

"—Hello."

To be honest, I did not want to pick up, but not knowing what might happen afterwards, I reluctantly pressed the call button. An image with static appeared on the terminal's LCD screen.

'Hi, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe.'

Shown on screen was a man dressed in NIFL's military uniform, staring at me with his slender eyes.

"As expected... It's Major Loki."

I sighed. The caller was just as I suspected, my commanding officer back in my NIFL days, also the man who wanted to cultivate me into the strongest "killer."

Chapter 1

'It's been a while—That's not a greeting I need to use given the last time we spoke. First of all, let me commend you for successfully taking out Basilisk. Congratulations. Excellent job. Was Mistilteinn of use?'

"...Yes, thanks to you. But I could not have defeated Basilisk on my own. Getting through the crisis was the result of cooperation."

I had asked Major Loki during the Basilisk battle for a NIFL-developed bomb—Mistilteinn—to be handed over for us to use. That request was made according to Major Loki's verbal promise of a favor no matter what, which he made after the Leviathan battle. This meant that we were even now, but I felt slightly apologetic because my demand much have been too much.

'No no, you were amazing. Now, the defeated dragons number three: "Purple" Kraken, "White" Levithan and "Red" Basilisk. "Black" Vritra has gone missing and "Blue" Hekatonkheir has not surfaced ever since it was driven off from Midgard. The only dragons currently confirmed as active are "Yellow" Hraesvelgr and "Green" Yggdrasil.'

"Yeah..."

Major Loki talked up a storm but I replied briefly.

'You are very fortunate—2nd Lieutenant Mononobe. You are truly fortunate that "Yellow" Hraesvelgr wasn't among the dragons you were forced to defeat earlier.'

"Huh...?"

Unable to understand what Major Loki was getting at, I made a questioning sound.

'Oh my, you're not aware? Hraesvelgr is currently regarded as the dragon that is impossible to fight.'

"No... I've heard that it's the most troublesome opponent, but not to the point that it's impossible to fight..."

'True, that's a position that cannot be approved from Midgard's standpoint. But we of NIFL has come to that conclusion from the standpoint reality."

Chapter 1

I had often heard that Hraesvelgr was a formidable foe but this was my first time being told explicitly the dragon was impossible to fight. In charge of handling dragon disasters across the entire world, NIFL possessed vast quantities of data. Perhaps as a result of that, their assessment was far harsher than Midgard's.

"Why can you say with such certainty... it's impossible to fight?"

'The reason is simple, because we have attempted all kinds of attacks to no effect at all.'

"But the same applies to all the other dragons, right? Because they can't be defeated no matter what, that's why humans have suffered from dragon disasters for over twenty years."

'Indeed, apart from Hraesvelgr, NIFL cannot defeat any of the other dragons either, but that stems purely from weapon specs. Even if the opponent was that Leviathan, we could still inflict scratches by using laser weaponry in saturation attacks, but Hraesvelgr is on a completely different level.'

"...What do you mean by that?"

I frowned and asked.

'I said it already, no effect at all. Currently, there is absolutely no method capable of interfering against Hraesvelgr. Had it been Hraesvelgr attacking recently instead of Basilisk... You'd probably be forced to choose a different solution.'

"A different solution—Really?"

I remarked bitterly after realizing what Major Loki implied.

'Your face betrays your skepticism. You don't mean to say... that even if Hraesvelgr were to attack, you'd still fight it?'

"Indeed."

I could answer this question without any hesitation at all. However, Major Loki made a look of disappointment and sighed.

'—2nd Lieutenant Mononobe, that is called a futile struggle, not a fight. Because I've mentioned that fighting is impossible, I wish you could come up with the best solution while taking this as a precondition.'

"....."

I knew what Major Loki's 'best solution' was referring to. Namely, to kill the D targeted by the dragon, but I could not approve of that kind of method at all.

'Your face betrays your wish to differ. Although your contributions to Leviathan and Basilisk's defeats were amazing accomplishments... You seem to have forgotten your real job. Your power exists purely for murder—'

"Major Loki, what business do you have this time?"

I interrupted him and demanded for him to get to the main point.

Because I did not want to listen any further to a conversation that pissed me off.

'Hoo—Are you that unwilling to confront who you are? Fine, let's get to the main point. Your current position should be the Principality of Erlia, right?'

"...Yes."

Having applied for permission to leave Midgard's borders, our actions were naturally known to NIFL. There was no point in hiding things.

'Your objective is to guard Kili Surtr Muspelheim and transport her to Midgard, right? Seriously... Midgard's decision really calls their sanity into question.'

Major Loki sighed deeply then turned his sharp gaze at me.

'—However, it's convenient that the team includes you. I have only one item of business with you, namely, I want to ask you to eliminate Kili.'

I had pretty much guessed what Major Loki was going to say, but I could not agree to his request.

"Your request goes against Midgard's policy."

'Of course I know that, but Kili is a terrorist. Whether to humans, to Ds, or to yourself, she is only a disaster, right?'

Major Loki asserted in a strong tone of voice. I had also predicted what he was going to say, but—

"At least at this point in time, Kili is under our protection. I cannot take hostile action on my own."

'Mm-hmm&mash;So you insist on obeying Midgard's decision. As a member of an organization, that's the correct decision. You're not declining out of a concern for getting your hands dirty... Hence, I can't force you.'

Major Loki spoke suggestively while shrugging.

"I am terribly sorry I cannot agree to your request."

I apologized to him somewhat sarcastically.

'No, it's fine, I was simply looking for an easy solution. However, I guess I have to do my own work aftr all.'

"Huh...?"

Seeing a smile surface on Major Loki's lips, I could only feel a sense of chill.

'My side will take care of Kili. I hope you won't interfere, if possible... But if you insist on fulfilling your duties loyally, that'll be interesting too. It's not a bad idea to use this chance to make you the complete "Fafnir"—'

—Beep.

Leaving ominous words behind, Major Loki hung up on his own.

I stood there frozen in the room that had returned to silence.

Major Loki was going to take action. In other words, he was going to send his team.

This time, I really was going to fight the special forces team I used to belong to—Sleipnir.

And perhaps...

The figure of a certain man flashed in my mind. He was Major Loki's personal bodyguard and the one with the deepest history with "Fafnir."

Recalling things about *him*, I could not help but clench my fist.

Part 6

From the closet in my room, I picked out a suit that looked the most respectable. After changing swiftly, I exited the room and came to the corridor.

Although there was still plenty of time before the dinner party, I wanted to inform either Shinomiya-sensei or Mitsuki about my conversation with Major Loki.

After hesitating slightly regarding which of them I should report to, I knocked on Mitsuki's door. If I told Mitsuki, Shinomiya-sensei would automatically know, right?

"—Yes, what is it?"

A slightly muffled voice came from the other side of the door.

"Mitsuki, it's me. I need to talk to you."

"N-Nii-san? Hold on, I am currently—Ah... No, on further thought, you came at the perfect time, Nii-san. C-Could you let yourself in?"

Noticing that she sounded a little flustered, but since she allowed me to enter the room, I opened the door.

Mitsuki seemed to be somewhere out of sight from the entrance, so I closed the door and entered.

"U-Umm... I am over here."

I found Mitsuki standing in front of a large mirror next to the closet. However, the sight of her attire took my breath away.

Mitsuki was dressed in a magnificent purple formal dress. Undoubtedly, it was an outfit for attending a dinner party, but this was my first time seeing Mitsuki all dressed up, so—For a moment, I could not help but stare at her in mesmerization.

"Nii-san... Umm, may I trouble you to do the back for me?"

Awkwardly, apparently quite shyly, Mitsuki turned her back to me. It looked like she had been struggling to pull the zipper on her back. From the gap in her dress, I could see her underwear and pale skin.

"Got it..."

Frantically, I approached Mitsuki. Perhaps due to nervousness, I accidentally touched Mitsuki's skin when reaching for the zipper.

"Hyah... H-Hold on, Nii-san, where do you think you are touching?"

Mitsuki glared at me in surprise.

"S-Sorry."

I apologized to her. This time, I cautiously pulled the zipper up, covering up her pale skin with the purple dress.

In the past, I probably would not be this nervous. But having learned of Mitsuki's feelings—knowing we were not siblings by blood—It was impossible for me not to be conscious now.

"Thank you, Nii-san, what is your opinion...? Does it look weird anywhere?"

Mitsuki spun around once then sought my opinion.

"Hmm... No, not weird at all. This dress looks great on you."

"Wonderful, ah—Nii-san, your suit too... Umm, it looks great."

With blushing cheeks, Mitsuki praised my attire. However, she narrowed her eyes as though noticing something and drew closer.

"Still, it could be better, you tie is crooked."

Mitsuki reached for my collar and adjusted my tie's position for me.

"S-Sorry."

Mitsuki was dressed in a lovely outfit and standing within a breath's distance. It was a very surreal scene—yet Mitsuki was undoubtedly right here at my side—This discrepancy between feeling and cognition was making me dizzy.

"Much better... Well then, Nii-san, what did you want to talk about?"

"O-Oh, actually—"

I came back to my senses and told Mitsuki about how Major Loki had called me and sent a team to kill Kili.

"...I see. It is expected that NIFL would make a move, but there is one fact that bothers me—Come to think of it, does NIFL even have the power to threaten Kili-san?"

While taking care not to wrinkle her dress, Mitsuki sat down on the chair in front of the dressing table while offering her view.

I understood what she was saying. Because prior to this, NIFL had been trying to take Kili's life but never succeeded. However—

"Major Loki mentioned before that his team—Sleipnir—was fighting Kili in an intense battle while NIFL took in Tia from the Sons of Muspell facility. Consequently, I don't think they're easy enemies for Kili."

"...Understood. I will inform Shinomiya-sensei and discuss the upcoming plans and bodyguard arrangements."

Mitsuki nodded with her Counter-Dragon Squad captain's expression.

Most unpredictable of all was what action Kili would take. Unless her intent and purpose was known, we would most likely end up being manipulated and used by her.

—Kili was probably somewhere in the palace right now.

I involuntarily looked at the ceiling while pondering.

It was almost time for the dinner party. The sensation of burying a sharp object into her abdomen that time was reawakening in the palm of my hand. Even though it was for protecting my friends, at the time, I was fighting her with the intent to kill her.

Although I had deliberately avoided her vitals at the critical moment and Kili had used dark matter for biogenic transmutation to instantly heal her wound— It was also true that I had crossed my line of not killing, one that I had always insisted prior to that.

That fact could not be erased at all.

Meeting her again, would another change come to me? Unable to calm my emotions, I waited for that moment to arrive.

Just before the dinner party started, Helen-san came to welcome us.

The girls were coming out of their rooms one after another, dressed in different styles of dresses that suited them.

"Ooh, this feels kinda weird."

Ariella tugged at her yellow-green dress and touched the skirt's frilly fabric while commenting.

"Mm..."

Ren could not settle down either. She kept inspecting the crimson dress that matched her red hair.

"Worry not, your attire suits both of you very well."

Wearing an elegant pale-yellow dress, Lisa praised the two of them.

However, speaking of suitability, Lisa's dress suited her the best. I got the feeling that she was very used to wearing formal dresses, or rather, she looked more natural in one than the usual uniform.

"What are you staring at, Mononobe Yuu?"

Noticing my gaze, Lisa asked with displeasure in her voice.

"Huh? Oh—I just find your attire extremely natural. A dress looks really good on you. It feels very cool."

"Cool... Huh?"

Lisa frowned.

"No—Sorry, let me pick my words better. What I mean is it's splendid, Lisa, you look very splendid in a dress."

Thinking cool was not the right word for praising a lady, I corrected myself.

"What..."

Lisa instantly blushed and glared at me.

"I-I will not be happy even if you flatter me! You won't gain anything no matter how much you flatter me!"

"I'm not looking to gain anything. Seeing you in a dress is good enough for me."

"...!? Y-You're mocking me, aren't you!?"

Seeing Lisa anger inexplicably, I panicked. Did I say something wrong again?

"I-I'm not mocking you! By the way, what happened to Tia?"

I explained myself while changing the subject. Tia, who was supposed to be Lisa's roommate, had not come out to the corridor.

"...Regarding Tia-san, she is fast asleep in the room. Since I am worried about letting her meet Kili suddenly, I've decided not to force her to wake up."

An expression of displeasure surfaced on Lisa's face while she answered me.

"I see, that does seem to be better."

Tia and Kili had a long history going back. We should first check out Kili's attitude before letting them meet.

This meant that Iris was the only one who had yet to leave her room.

Shinomiya-sensei was wearing a mature and attractive blue dress whereas Mitsuki's was purple. The two of them were checking out Iris' room, calling to her inside.

"Iris Freyja, are you not ready?"

"Iris-san, everyone is waiting for you!"

"—Wah, s-sorry! I'll be over right away!"

Iris exited the room frantically in a panic.

The hem of her dress, as pure-white as fresh snow, fluttered lightly while she walked.

All dressed up, Iris really seemed like a fairy who had escaped from the land of fairy tales. My gaze was strongly attracted to that otherworldly beauty of hers.

I was staring at her silently when our gazes met.

"M-Mononobe... What's the matter?"

"—So beautiful."

I could not think of any other comment apart from that.

Iris exhaled and relaxed as though relieved of her worries.

"I'm so glad..."

Watching our interactions, Lisa glared at me with apparent displeasure.

"Compared to the one offered to me, your comment seems rather upfront in comparison."

Mitsuki also glared at me with eyes of discontent.

"Nii-san, you only said the dress looks great on me... Were you just being polite?"

"N-No, that's not what I meant!"

I frantically explained.

Seeing our situation, Shinomiya-sensei smiled with slight wryness then turned to look at Helen-san.

"—Sorry for adding to your troubles. Please lead the way."

"Understood. Everyone, this way please."

Helen-san nodded then walked in front to guide us.

Using a different staircase from when we got here, we went down one floor, passed through a spacious hall then arrived before a pair of doors. A fragrant aroma instantly greeted us.

Helen-san opened the door and we entered.

Appearing before my eyes was a long and spacious dining table laden with dishes. Four people were seated already. I originally expected a party resembling a continental buffet, but it looked like we were going to sit down to dine normally.

Sitting on the far end at the head of the table was man, most likely Firill's father—the next king. A woman, probably the next queen, and Firill were seated respectively on his left and right.

Firill's formal dress was primarily blue in color. Worn around her neck was a necklace with a large blue gemstone. This attire truly befitted her identity as a princess.

Then sitting next to the next queen was a girl in a black dress, Kili Surtr Muspelheim.

Kili looked straight at us—rather, straight at me—and smiled.

It was impossible to tell what she was thinking from her expression.

The man got up from his seat on the far end and nodded to greet us.

"Welcome, I am Alfred Crest, Firill's father. Since the coronation ceremony will take place after my father's funeral, I am still the Crown Prince—nevertheless, I represent my country in extending a welcome to you all. Please sit wherever you wish."

Prince Alfred invited us to take our seats.

Before anyone else could make a move, I sat down first at what might be the most dangerous spot, the one next to Kili. I could not allow Mitsuki or the others to sit somewhere like this.

"—I knew you'd come. I'm so happy to see you again, Yuu."

Whispering quietly at a volume only audible to me, Kili gazed at me with passionate eyes.

"Frankly speaking... I don't want to see you."

I lowered my voice as well and answered at a volume too quiet for Prince Alfred and the others to hear.

"Oh my, how cold of you. I never forgot you for even an instant."

Kili touched her abdomen and smiled.

That was where I had stabbed her with a metal fragment. Just as I could not forget the sensation of that act, she also remembered the pain of the stab wound very clearly.

"....."

Not knowing how to answer, I turned my gaze away from Kili with bitter feelings.

After confirming that everyone was seated, Prince Alfred sat down again. As though waiting for the moment, this time, it was the next queen who spoke:

"You must all be tired after your long journey. I am Fariel Crest, Alfred's wife as well as Firill's mother. Firill's elders sisters were supposed to join us, but they need to prepare for the festival..."

"No, please don't let that weigh on your mind. We are the ones who feel sorry for making unreasonable demands. I thank you sincerely for permitting our sudden visit to your country."

Shinomiya-sensei expressed gratitude and bowed her head deeply. Seeing Lisa and Mitsuki get up to bow, I hastily followed suit.

After sweeping a glance across each of us, Kili took her turn to speak.

"I, Kili, am truly grateful for all of you to come today at my request. I am deeply moved to have fellow Ds from Midgard come all the way here to welcome me."

Hearing her empty words, Lisa and Mitsuki showed overt distaste on their faces but could not expose Kili's true identity here.

Hence, we all took turns and introduced ourselves, pretending to meet her for the first time. Since the sequence started with Lisa, who was sitting next to Firill, I was the last one.

"—I am Mononobe Yuu, nice to meet you."

I stated my name while seated and bowed. Immediately, Prince Alfred looked at me with eyes filled with interest.

"I have heard rumors due to our relationship with Midgard as sponsors... But to think a male D really existed."

"My dear, it is quite impertinent for you to stare like this. Let us end the pleasantries here and begin the meal. The food will get cold if we don't start."

"—Right, well said."

Persuaded by Princess Fariel, Prince Alfred nodded in agreement.

Hence, the superficially harmonious dinner party began. Of course, none of us was in the mood to enjoy the peaceful atmosphere. While eating, we kept paying attention to Kili's movements.

"Are you and Firill close friends?"

"Since we're classmates... I guess we're okay."

Under such circumstances, Prince Alfred kept talking to me for some reason.

"Is tough for you, being the only man among girls?"

"A lot of things were definitely troubling in the beginning... But I'm living quite happily nowadays."

"Oh, but that kind of environment could be problematic, right? How should I put this? Well—Won't there be romantic disputes?"

"Eh...? No, that's—"

Suddenly asked this kind of in-depth question, I could not help but feel troubled.

"My dear, please do not pose such crude and vulgar questions."

"...Father, if you put Mononobe-kun on the spot, please know that I will be mad."

Glared at by Princess Fariel and Firill, Prince Alfred shrank away.

"...Oh, I suppose you're right. My apologies for asking you an impertinent question."

Prince Alfred apologized to me in contrition.

He probably felt worried that a man like me had been added to the place where Firill was living.

"No, umm, it's okay. Nothing happened between us, Prince Alfred, for you to worry about that sort of thing."

I added but Firill smiled mischievously and asked with her head tilted:

"...Eh? Is that really the case?"

"F-Firill!?"

Hearing what Firill said, I panicked.

"What? Something really did happen?"

Prince Alfred shot his sharp gaze at me.

"Father, please don't worry, when the necessary time arrives... I will make him take responsibility and become my prince."

Firill made a shocking statement with a nonchalant expression.

"What... I don't suppose you and Firill have already reached that kind of relationship!?"

"O-Of course not!"

I desperately tried to calm down Prince Alfred.

"Mononobe, something must have happened between you and Firill-chan, right?"

"Nii-san, could you explain in greater detail?"

Even Iris and Mitsuki were glaring at me, interrogating me in a low voice.

"I'm begging you all, please calm down!"

In this manner, which was uncertain whether it could be described as harmonious, the dinner party proceeded relatively peacefully and Kili showed no signs of malevolence.

When Ren, the slowest eater, finished her plate and everyone's conversations had winded down, the dinner party came to a close.

"—We would like to discuss with her about the itinerary henceforth. Could you lend this room to us for a while longer?"

Shinomiya-sensei spoke to Prince Alfred who had gotten up from his seat.

"Sure, no problem. I will order someone to bring drinks slightly later."

Prince Alfred nodded in assent then left the room with Princess Fariel. The cheerful interior of the room was instantly plunged into silence.

More talkative than usual when in front of her parents, Firill now showed a tense expression while she stared at Kili. Despite being the target of everyone's gazes, Kili showed a smile of composure on her face.

Soon after, Helen-san came with a tray of drinks. Just as she exited the room, Shinomiya-sensei finally spoke to Kili.

"So, what is your objective?"

"...How rude to ask that right off the bat. Didn't you guys come to pick me up because I sought Midgard's protection?"

Kili's tone of voice made her sound like a completely different person compared to when Prince Alfred was present.

"Indeed, but pray enlighten me as to the reason."

"I thought I already mentioned the reason on television? Namely, my life is under threat."

"That's not something new in recent days, is it?"

Kili had been active until now as the leader of the Sons of Muspell. It would be far too unnatural for her to seek Midgard's protection at this juncture.

"Definitely, but I'm currently cornered to an unprecedented extent, hence—I hope you will save me."

Instead of looking at Shinomiya-sensei, Kili directed her last sentence to me.

"...Is the enemy so powerful that you feel your life is in danger?"

I took on her gaze and asked.

"Yes."

"What kind of enemy will make you this wary? Sleipnir?"

"Sleipnir?"

Kili frowned as though she was hearing the term for the first time.

"It's the NIFL team that barred your way when they were taken action to get a hold of Tia. Don't you remember?"

"Ah, you mean that inexplicably troublesome team. Yes, they are a threat too."

"Then you mean there are other enemies?"

"Yes, of course. However, it'd take forever I had to list them all out, because I have too many enemies. That is why I have no choice apart from seeking your assistance in order to escape their pursuit and find safety."

Kili looked at each of us then turned her gaze back to Shinomiya-sensei.

"So, first of all, I would like you to tell us everything you know. In particular, unless we verify your relationship with Hekatonkheir, we will not allow you into Midgard."

Shinomiya-sensei spoke in a forceful tone of voice.

Roughly a month earlier, Kili had infiltrated Midgard in an attempt to retrieve Tia. Then as though summoned by her, Hekatonkheir had also made a sudden appearance at Midgard.

Kili had called Hekatonkheir "mother" upon seeing it. Although I did not think the literal meaning applied, some sort of deep relationship definitely existed between them.

"Regarding this matter—I will tell you as soon as we leave this country."

"Then I hope to depart immediately. According to information just received, NIFL's team has apparently mobilized to eliminate you. If you wish for safety, leaving this country ASAP is the wise choice."

"Yes, I'd like to do that too but I already promised to attend King Albert's funeral. I also have a speech scheduled on the last day."

Kili shrugged and replied.

"For someone who claims to be cornered... You seem rather laid back."

"I am indebted to this country for taking me in. Wouldn't it be too fickle to leave as soon as someone came to pick me up? And if I backed out of attending the funeral this late, wouldn't that worsen the outside world's view of the Ds?"

"...So you insist on refusing to disclose your true goal."

Shinomiya-sensei sighed deeply.

"You are too suspicious. What I said was clearly all true."

Kili smiled faintly and sighed as well.

"No helping it—Then we will follow the original plan and guard you until the funeral ends. Let us find a chance to talk again after we leave the country. I hope you will adhere to your promise and tell us everything, including your relationship with Hekatonkheir."

"Yes, I promise you."

Kili made an unreadable smile and nodded.

"—I look forward to you keeping your promise. Then about tomorrow's schedule..."

"I've been confined in this palace for a while now, so I'd like to go outside. Could you take me sightseeing to some of this country's attractions?"

Kili interrupted Shinomiya-sensei and spoke to Firill.

"...Are you even listening? Someone is targeting your life, right?"

Firill asked with a troubled expression.

"It's precisely because someone is targeting my life. They have already mobilized a team. No matter where, I will be attacked sooner or later. In that case, it's preferable to choose a location more suited to battle, right? My combat style is not suited to indoors."

"But..."

"If damage to the surroundings need not be considered while fighting in the palace—I don't mind staying here obediently. But when that happens, your loved ones might get caught in the crossfire."

"....."

Firill could only stay silent in response to Kili's counterarguments.

"Looks like we've reached a conclusion. Let's set off after breakfast tomorrow."

Deciding on the schedule on her own, Kili got up from her seat.

Watching her leave the room with relaxed footsteps, no one stopped her. Then the door slammed shut.

"—I feel like we are being totally used by her."

Lisa remarked unhappily and stood up from her seat.

"Yeah, she's clearly hiding something."

"Mm."

Ariella and Ren concurred. Everyone else nodded in agreement.

Then everyone left together. When going up the stairs, we parted ways with Firill on the third floor. Her room was apparently on the fourth.

"You may experience difficulties in adjusting to the time difference, but please do not oversleep tomorrow."

Mitsuki reminded us loudly. Everyone showed fatigue on their face.

"O-Okay... I'll try my best but I'm not confident."

Iris answered with a wry smile.

Thus, we all entered our respective rooms.

Thinking I'd take a shower first, I loosened my tie while walking to the bathroom. Then I heard a knock at my door.

Did Mitsuki forget to announce something? Guessing that, I opened the door—

"What..."

Standing in front of my room was Kili in her black dress.

"Why are you here...?"

"I secretly followed you because I need to talk to you alone."

Kili smiled seductively then swiftly entered the room, closing the door behind her. With pleading eyes, she looked up at me.

"...You need to talk to me?"

"That NIFL team that you mentioned—Sleipnir—has probably arrived in this country already. Actually, I was attacked when going out recently. I think they were probably responsible."

I was shocked to hear what Kili said. Major Loki sounded like he was about to mobilize his troops, but now it seemed like things were in motion already. He probably thought of testing the waters to see if I could be used only because I happened to have arrived in the country.

"But the problem came later. I don't know if it was one of them... Or sent by another faction. A tall man with his face obscured by a helmet entered the fight—I almost got killed by him."

"You almost got killed... Really?"

I could not believe instantly so I asked her again.

"It's true. I got a sense that he was very similar to you, that you when you stabbed the piece of steel into my body—"

My heart was beating intensely and my limbs trembled involuntarily.

So Major Loki really deployed *him* into battle after all—

"Judging by your reaction, you know who he is?"

"No, well—"

Since this was not something to be disclosed lightly, I answered vaguely.

"Never mind, after all... You are the only one I trust."

Kili smiled and touched my cheek with her right hand. I was a bit surprised by the unexpectedly cold sensation. At the same time, I noticed the fabric wrapped around Kili's right hand.

From the back of her hand to slightly above her wrist, everything was wrapped under a white bandage. Since her fingers were not wrapped and she was wearing a long-sleeved dress, I did not notice earlier.

"Your right hand... It's injured?"

I felt curious while asking her. Since it was Kili, she should be able to heal wounds instantly using biogenic transmutation.

"Oh—This isn't an injury."

Kili smiled wryly and separated from me, hiding her right hand behind herself.

"Then goodnight, Yuu. Surely, you will be able to protect me, no matter who the enemy is."

Leaving such words behind, Kili exited my room.

I still could not fathom what her goals were but judging from the way her eyes gazed at me, I could tell that she was struggling desperately. I suppose her seeking of help was probably real.

"You overestimate me."

I muttered quietly.

The tall man who had almost killed Kili, if he turned out to be the one I predicted—Then he was the only exception whom I absolutely could not defeat.

No, more accurately—*It was impossible for me to defeat him*.

Chapter 2 - Silver-Armored Hreidmar

Part 1

Three years prior—after NIFL took me away—I became Major Loki's subordinate and went through his "education."

It started mainly with basic physical training and language to facilitate communications with teammates on the battlefield, without actual firearm combat.

But conversely, one mandatory lesson I had each day was to watch that man fight.

The location was sometimes in a training room, sometimes on a real battlefield. I was ordered to watch how he fought the whole time.

My gaze was not allowed to shift, simply staring at him fight for hours on end. I had no idea what the point was, but could only obey.

However, even I felt rather surprised... Spending time like that did not feel like hardship for me.

His fighting style was very refined. While I watched in mesmerization, time flew by instantly.

With his entire body clad in silver armor, he effortlessly subdued the enemies blocking his path.

Even if surrounded by a large group, he would become the only person standing after several gunshots.

Racing past hails of bullets, he vanquished enemy troops without suffering a single wound.

His fighting style was as though he had perfect knowledge of human movements and bullet trajectories.

This kind of technique was not possible for humans. "What" on earth was he?

One day, I posed this question to Major Loki. For myself back then, speaking up to ask a question needed a huge amount of courage. Even so, I still asked while preparing myself to be punished.

This was proof how fascinated I was with that man's fighting at the time.

"Let's put it this way, he is my personal bodyguard... If you are going to develop into the real 'Fafnir,' then he would be Hreidmar."

Without scolding me, Major Loki replied. It was truly a strange analogy.

The name Hreidmar belonged to the father of Fafnir in mythology. This story was something I learned about much later.

Starting from that day, my daily observation of him—Hreidmar—was cancelled. Replacing it was the beginning of combat training.

I asked Major Loki for the reason and his answer was:

"—Because the seed has already taken root inside your 'gap.' There is no need to watch an inferior reference anymore."

For him with such a powerful and elegant fighting style to be called an inferior reference, I found it hard to believe.

But now... *Having become an existence very close to his*, I now understood vaguely.

He was probably the previous "Fafnir" raised by Major Loki.

Part 2

"Yuu! Time to get up! It's morning!"

Feeling my head shaken by a shrill voice, I woke up to find Tia jumping up and down on the bed.

I think I was dreaming of the past, but listening to Tia's voice, I gradually became unable to recall the contents of my dream.

I looked at my portable terminal next to the pillow. It was still a bit too early to get up.

"...Good morning, Tia. You're really energetic this early in the morning."

I rubbed my eyes and sat up.

"Yeah, because Tia slept for so long and is full of energy now."

Tia had fallen asleep during the plane ride and slept all the way until the next morning. She had apparently overcome the time difference as a result.

"I'm surprised you knew... that my room was here."

"Tia tried hard to get Lisa out of bed, but Lisa told Tia the location of Yuu's room and had Tia wake Yuu first."

—That Lisa. She told Tia to come over to me first because she wanted to sleep longer.

Despite my resentment for having my sleeping time reduced, I could not complain since Lisa had to look after Tia every day.

I gave up resisting, switched moods and got out of bed. Beyond the balcony, I could see the fountain in the courtyard, glittering under the morning sunlight.

Since the sun had set last night, I did not notice that there were many types of flowers planted in the courtyard. These were probably species suited to high altitudes. Petals of vivid hues decorated the courtyard in a colorful display.

"By the way, Tia, have you heard about today's schedule?"

"No, not yet."

"Let me be frank—After breakfast today, we're going sightseeing together with Kili."

"...With Kili?"

Gloom shrouded Tia's face.

"You could stay here if you don't want to go, you know? Besides, NIFL might be attacking too."

I made this suggestion in light of her relationship with Kili. Tia bowed her head and thought for a while before clenching her tiny fist and looking at me.

"Yuu will protect Kili?"

"Yeah."

"If that's the case... Tia will protect Yuu, so Tia will come along too!"

Tia spoke with eyes of determination.

"...I see. Thank you."

I thanked Tia and patted her head.

"Ehehe!"

Tia smiled happily and leaned her head towards me.

But at this moment, her stomach rumbled adorably.

"...So ashamed."

Tia clutched her stomach and went red with embarrassment.

She must be famished, having skipped the dinner party last night.

"You should go to the dining hall first and see if you can ask someone to prepare food for your first."

"Ah—Okay!"

Tia made an excited expression then nodded vigorously.

Thus, a brand new day started.

Today was the first day of King Albert's three-day funeral. It was this country's custom to see the deceased off in a lively celebration, hence, this was also the beginning of a grand festival.

Part 3

After breakfast, we went sightseeing as planned.

Taking a stretch limo would attract too much attention after all, hence, we left the palace in a large van prepared by Helen-san instead.

Shinomiya-sensei was driving while Firill sat in the front passenger seat to provide directions.

Including Kili, the eight of us sat face to face in the spacious back of the van. Instead of the formal dresses last night, Mitsuki and the girls were wearing their school uniforms with a winter jacket on top.

The atmosphere in the van could not be described as harmonious, because of Kili.

Everyone had a stiff expression because they had to stay on guard against attackers and Kili herself. Tia was particularly nervous. Sitting between Lisa and me, she was holding our hands tightly.

"—The most popular tourist attraction in the country is Erlia Castle, but since we're going there anyway during the festival, let me take us sightseeing somewhere else."

From the front passenger seat, Firill looked back and told us.

The van was crossing a bridge over the lake while making its way towards town.

"Where are we going first?"

To slightly ease the tense atmosphere, I asked in a cheerful voice.

"...The Great Waterfall of Erlia. It's quite spectacular."

Firill made a thumbs-up and answered. She seemed quite confident.

After crossing the bridge, the van drove on a road along the lakeshore. The town seemed even more lively than yesterday, with many people packed in the streets.

"—How lively. You guys should enjoy the festivities and stop making such scary faces."

Looking out at the scenery the whole time, Kili turned her gaze back into the vehicle and spoke to the others.

"Now that would be a challenging demand. Have you forgotten your past deeds?"

However, Lisa retorted sarcastically.

"Speaking of which... Back when I was taking Tia away, I did fight you once. Although I had no intention of killing you, I apologize for injuring you."

"An injury of that sort is trivial. Rather than apologize, I would rather have you swear you will never betray us. Because what I fear most is my comrades coming to harm."

"Sure, I will promise you that, since right now, I have no reason to harm any of you. However... Will you really be at ease just because I said so?"

Kili answered sarcastically.

"If you responded seriously to me, perhaps I might be reassured slightly... But right now, it's impossible."

"Really? What a shame. I thought I was very serious already. Looks like my seriousness was not conveyed to you."

Kili shrugged then turned her gaze towards Tia whose entire body was stiff.

"Tia, you can probably believe me, right? To this date, I have never harmed you, right?"

"That's true... But you did many awful things to Tia's loved ones."

Tia squeezed my hand and answered.

Hearing her answer, Kili swept her gaze across everyone in turn then smiled as though in resignation.

"—All of you seem to worry more about others than yourselves."

"Not merely others, but family. We worry about one another precisely because we are family."

Lisa corrected Kili.

"What strong camaraderie, I'm envious. If I made a request, may I join your circle?"

"...If that is your sincere wish, I shall consider it."

Despite glaring at Kili, Lisa gave a positive answer with a condition attached.

"You are truly nice to a fault. Given the rare opportunity I really would like to accept your benevolence, but I guess it's impossible for me, because I am definitely different from you people. Even Tia, whom I painstakingly raised, has forsaken me."

Kili sighed and turned her gaze to Tia again.

"Frankly speaking, that was quite a blow to me, you know? Because I never expected you would change allegiance in a few short days, having believed in me and obeyed me all along."

"Ah..."

Tia widened her eyes and seemed to understand something.

"Did Tia... hurt Kili's feelings?"

"Fufu—indeed, it does make me a little sad. Now that I think back... The reason why I gave you horns was perhaps to create an existence as close to mine as possible."

Kili shrugged and laughed in self-deprecation. Somehow, I got the feeling that Kili was speaking from the heart just now.

"U-Umm..."

Silent until now, Iris immediately spoke.

"I remember you—Iris-san, right? What is it?"

"Based on what you just said... Do you consider yourself a dragon like Tia-chan did before, Kili-chan?"

"K-Kili-chan?"

Kili was unsettled by Iris' way of addressing her, but she immediately concealed her feelings and continued.

"...Since I am seeking Midgard's protection, I won't call myself a dragon no matter what. But it's a fact that I am different from you all. As to what kind of person I am, please ask him, okay?"

Saying that, Kili pointed at me.

"Ask Mononobe? Why?"

Iris widened her eyes in surprise, tilting her head in puzzlement.

"Because I asked him just as I was leaving Midgard. I said: 'Who I am? If it's okay with you, can I ask you to decide?'"

I remembered Kili asking something like that in response to my question of who she was. At the time, I simply thought she was dodging the question, but her eyes gazing at me were very serious.

"Kili, you..."

"Judging from your reaction, it looks like I won't get the answer yet. Fine, whatever—I will continue to wait."

Kili spoke with disappointment then shrugged.

"...What do you mean?"

With a muddled look on her face, Iris looked alternately between me and Kili.

"She insists on withholding the truth."

Lisa remarked in irritation.

Indeed, Kili seemed to be trying to deceive us with ambiguous language... But I could also feel that—It was possible that she really had no idea what words to use to describe herself.

RUMBLE—...

We were surrounded by an astounding roaring, the sound of lake water plunging dozens of meters into a river.

"So this is the Great Waterfall of Erlia..."

Drowned out by the roaring sound, my mutters failed to reach anyone's ears.

This was an observation deck overlooking the entire waterfall. Iris and Tia were horsing around in excitement next to the railing while Ariella and Ren were using the camera functions of their portable terminals to take photos as keepsakes.

Having been confined in the palace for a while recently, Kili took a deep breath comfortably while Mitsuki and Lisa monitored her warily. Shinomiya-sensei was slightly farther away, talking to someone on the phone.

—I've a dam release before, but it could not compare to this.

Just as I was deeply impressed by the powerful sight of the giant waterfall, hundreds of meters wide, Firill approached me.

She was wearing a wide hat securely with a scarf covering her mouth. These efforts were probably to prevent others from recognizing her identity, but I wondered if the disguise was actually effective.

"...Mononobe-kun, how is the waterfall?"

Since it was hard for our voices to reach one another if speaking normally, Firill stood on tiptoe slightly and spoke in my ear. This sort of distance, within a breath's reach, made my heart begin to race, but I suppressed my wavering emotions then brought my lips next to Firill's ear.

"It's spectacular. Seeing so much water flow down, it makes me worry about the lake drying up."

"It won't dry up because the meltwater from the mountains flows into the lake. There is a royal cottage nearby... I like to read there a lot."

We were carrying our conversation by speaking alternately in each other's ear. Every time we spoke, our distance would shrink and Firill's voluptuous bust

would touch my arm. Feeling that soft sensation through clothing, it made my heartbeat accelerate.

"You can read in such a noisy place?"

"I stop hearing unnecessary noise after I grow accustomed to it, which allows me to really focus. The feeling is kind of like a rainy day's."

"I-I suppose. With so much noise, all other sounds would get drowned out."

Although I nodded to concur with what she said, I was finding it harder and harder to feign composure.

"...What's the matter? Your face is very red, you know?"

"No, umm..."

Hearing my vague answer, Firill probably thought I failed to catch what she said. She leaned in even closer.

"Mononobe-kun, are you okay?"

She had her breasts pressed tightly against my arm, making my heart pound even faster. To tell her that she was too close, I brought my face next to Firill's ear.

"—"

However, I seemed to hear a voice, so I turned my gaze towards the waterfall.

Iris, who was next to the railing with Tia to view the waterfall, was pointing her finger at me, saying something. Although I could not hear what she was saying due to the water being too loud, her face was bright red.

Seeing her like that, I finally noticed that my current posture made me look like I was just about to kiss Firill's cheek.

Iris ran over with her face red and kept hammering her hands against my chest.

"N-No doing that in this kind of place!"

"No, you got the wrong idea!"

I shook my head and yelled.

"Mononobe, you're such a jerk! What if Mitsuki-chan sees?"

"...!"

After finding out why Iris was angry, I could not help but gasp.

"...?"

Unable to understand the situation, Firill looked incredulously at Iris' interactions with me.

"Iris, calm down. I was talking to Firill like that only because the waterfall is too loud—"

To explain the situation in detail, I brought my face next to Iris' ear.

"Eh? Y-You can't kiss me now either! Do you really... want to kiss that much?"

But she seemed to be misunderstanding my behavior again. Iris blushed all the way to her ears.

"No, like I said, that's not what's going on!"

"...No? Mononobe, you want to kiss Firill-chan... But not me?"

Iris looked at me, almost about to burst into tears.

"O-Of course not!"

Seeing me shake my head frantically in denial, Iris smiled, seemingly reassured.

"Then save it for later—You have to be patient for now, okay? So, if possible... If you don't do that to Firill-chan... I will be very happy."

After saying that in my ear, Iris shyly covered her face in her hands and fled.

S-Save it for later...?

After hearing her say that, I could not help but wonder whether I should clear up the misunderstanding.

"Mononobe-kun, what was that about?"

Firill asked with her head cocked.

"Don't mind it. Iris just got the wrong idea."

I sighed and answered. Whatever, although it was a shame... I felt bad about exploiting Iris' misunderstanding, so I decided to explain properly to her later.

Just as I made the decision mentally, my neck suddenly trembled but not from cold.

It was a gaze, sharp and murderous in intent.

"...!"

I looked back but could not see anyone.

—That's pretty quick.

I expected this long ago, but the enemy looked like they still intended to attack. If Sleipnir had already entered the Principality of Erlia, just as Kili said, then they must be the enemy.

I did not think that they would leak murderous intent so overtly as accomplished soldiers. Hence, this was probably a greeting to me, their former captain, as well as a final warning.

No mercy if you interfered—That was probably the message.

Then I could rule out the possibility that the incoming enemy was the tall man who had almost killed Kili. Because if he really was the one I predicted, he would not do anything this naive.

Looking around, I saw Kili with a tense expression, glaring in the same direction as I did.

In fact, Kili and I were probably the only ones capable of fighting Sleipnir. It seemed like the others had virtually no experience in human combat. It was possible to defeat Sleipnir through combat methods that destroyed them together with the town, but of course, such tactics were not allowed.

—Why don't Kili and I get this settled quickly, just the two of us?

Although I felt bad for the others, unless they possessed *combat instincts* allowing them to sense the murderous intent just now, I could not count them as potential combatants.

Even alone, Kili was capable of fighting Sleipnir, so with the addition of me, it should be enough.

Thinking that, I walked over to Kili. But along the way, I found one of my classmates staring in the direction of the killing intent.

"Ariella...?"

However, she soon shifted her gaze and went back to taking photos for Ren.

Perhaps she had sensed something without knowing it was dangerous.

Then sure enough, I could not get her involved.

Deciding that, I told only Kili my thoughts.

Part 4

After touring the waterfall, we headed back to town, bustling as a result of the festival.

Narrower streets were turned into pedestrian areas while vendor stalls were packed along entire streets. Sounds of firecrackers or fireworks could be heard from somewhere.

Shinomiya-sensei had handed out banknotes issued by the Principality of Erlia to everyone, saying "this is part of this mission's remuneration." Hence, we were going to use the money to go shopping happily.

"Nii-san, this dagger looks cool, right?"

Mitsuki showed me an ornate dagger that she had bought at high price from a shady vendor. It felt kind of like those wooden swords you'd buy during a school trip.

"...What's the use of buying something like that?"

"Not to be used, I will simply admire and view it. Do you not sense any dreams or adventures from the past, Nii-san?"

"Dreams or adventures from the past?"

The way I saw it, the dagger did not seem very old, but I'd better not spoil Mitsuki's lovely dream.

"Nii-san, it looks like you have no mind for understanding dreams and adventures."

Perhaps getting no reaction from me, Mitsuki went to find Lisa and show her the dagger.

The others seemed to be purchasing all kinds of souvenirs but I only planned on buying food. Since there was no telling when we might be attacked, I did not want excess baggage.

Kili was walking in the middle of our group while Shinomiya-sensei followed next to her.

There were currently no suspicious movements nearby. Iris was the only person behaving suspiciously.

Iris was hanging out with Lisa and the others but kept glancing at me from time to time. Whenever I tried to approach her, she blushed and hid behind Lisa and the others. This kept repeating.

"Iris, about just now—"

"Oh, n-not now, Mononobe! You need to be patient longer!"

I wanted to clear up the misunderstanding as quickly as possible, but Iris kept saying that and avoiding me all over the place. There was no end to it.

"Yuu, are you playing tag with Iris?"

Seeing our situation, Tia asked incredulously."

"No, it's not like that..."

I sighed and shook my head.

"Since you're not playing with Iris, then Tia wants you to help pick souvenirs."

Saying that, Tia pulled my arm and brought me to a stall selling accessories. Fine—It looked like I'll just have to come back to Iris' matter later, so I'll accompany Tia to pick out souvenirs for now.

"Which is better, Yuu?"

Tia pointed at exquisitely crafted hairpins and brooches, asking for my opinion.

"Let's see... This one suits you, right?"

After a quick look at the accessories laid out on sale, I pointed at a pink brooch in the shape of a flower.

"Ah, so cute! Tia wants to buy this one! Uh, how much—?"

"Oh, hold on, let me buy it."

"Ehhh!? Yuu wants to buy this?"

Tia asked me in shock. I replied with a wry smile.

"I'm not wearing it, what I mean is: I'm going to buy this as a gift to you, Tia."

Since I had no plans to buy souvenirs myself, there was no way I was going to use up the cash given to me, so buying a gift for Tia would be a good idea.

"Eh...?"

Just as Tia was staring speechlessly, I had already paid the vendor and received the flower brooch.

"Don't move for the time being."

I bent down in front of Tia and pinned the brooch in front of her chest.

"Yeah, this really suits you. Tia, it's very cute on you."

Saying that, I rubbed Tia's head. She immediately went red in the face and looked down.

"T-Thank you... A gift from Yuu... Tia will cherish it forever and ever."

Cradling the brooch in her hands, Tia thanked me in a slightly trembling voice. Seeing her acting a bit strange, I peered at her face.

"What's wrong?"

"Tia dosn't know... Tia's chest hurts despite feeling very happy. Oh... Tia will return to Lisa!"

I saw Tia leave me a little frantically, rushing towards Lisa and the others who were in front of a vendor opposite to us.

"Yuu, thank you so much!"

Tia looked back along the way and thanked me again.

Although I felt that her reaction was somehow different from usual, seeing her so happy, I thought there was probably no problem.

—My remaining money seemed enough to get another one.

Although brooches turned out to be more expensive than I imagined, my leftover money was enough to buy another accessory.

—That one seems to suit Iris.

"Please give me that one."

I bought a butterfly-shaped hairpin and placed it in my pocket. A small accessory of this sort would be easy to carry around.

The spare change remaining in my hand would probably get spent buying food at the stalls.

Hence, I bought a skewer of deep-fried fish without thinking.

"...Wow, this tastes good."

While sweet and delicious juices were spreading in my mouth, I could not help but exclaim in praise.

I had not expected much from the taste since it was something I picked randomly, but it turned out to be quite tasty.

Then I saw Firill approach, having bought the same food as me.

"That's probably fish that was caught in the river downstream of the waterfall we visited earlier. Since it happens to be the time of the year when fish swim upstream, the flesh is very rich and tasty."

Firill enjoyed her fish with an expression of joy.

"Wow, Firill, you even have chances to buy this kind of street food?"

"...I bought it secretly. I remember it was during Grandmother's funeral."

Firill stared in the distance nostalgically.

"Was it this lively back then too? It totally doesn't feel like a funeral."

Staring out at the city filled with smiles and cheering, I told her that.

"...Even so, this is still a ritual for seeing off the deceased. Putting it in Japanese terms, it's a festival for seeing off souls—a *konsousai*, so to speak."

"Konsousai huh... Now that you mention it, there is that kind of feeling."

My country also had a custom of seeing souls off in a festival. If I think of it as holding the festival starting at the funeral stage, then there was nothing out of place.

Perhaps overhearing our conversation, Ariella, who was nearby, also joined in.

"—What a great custom. It it's this lively, I'm sure the souls will forget their sorrow."

I could feel from Ariella's tone of voice what seemed to be sincere feelings from the heart, so I secretly glanced at her expression.

Come to think of it, before setting off for the Principality of Erlia, Ariella had mentioned seeing souls in the past. Firill also seemed to recall this. Slightly hesitantly, she inquired:

"Ariella... Do you really believe in souls?"

"Yes, I do."

Ariella asserted clearly.

"Could it be that... Ariella, you can see souls?"

Firill could not help but inquire whether she had spiritual powers. Ariella's sense of conviction was strong enough to raise this kind of question.

However, Ariella smiled wryly and shook her head.

"No, I'm not that kind of person. I just happened to be at a place where souls could be seen."

"...What happened there?"

Hearing such a strange way of putting things, Firill frowned.

Somewhat hesitantly, Ariella's gaze wandered for a while before she asked me and Firill:

"Do you know what power the yellow dragon—'Yellow' Hraesvelgr—uses?"

"Huh...?"

Firill did not seem to understand why a dragon was suddenly brought up. She sounded puzzled.

Although I could not figure out what Ariella was getting at, I asked on behalf of the baffled Firill.

"Isn't Hraesvelgr's power still unknown? I've only heard that it's the hardest to fight, a dragon which all attacks are ineffective against."

"—Yeah. Current science cannot explain the phenomena caused by Hraesvelgr, but anyone should be able to understand if they witnessed in person. Even if it's impossible to analyze with science, you can understand it through feeling."

"Ariella... Have you seen Hraesvelgr before?"

Hearing my question, Ariella nodded.

"Yes, according to myths, Hraesvelgr is a magical bird that swallows souls—And it's just as the legends describe. Before coming to Midgard, I lived in an unstable country. On many occasions, I witnessed Hraesvelgr materializing the souls of those who had died in war then devouring them."

"Materializing... souls?"

I don't know if this description is correct... But that's what it looked like to me, at least. Someone has also proposed the same hypothesis as mine. According to that person, Hraesvelgr's ability uses ether, a medium of unconfirmed particles, to materialize souls."

Ariella stopped at this point and looked away from us. Her gaze seemed to be directed at Ren who was together with Iris and the others.

Was the subject related to Ren somehow? Although I was curious, Ariella continued before I could ask.

"—But because current science does not recognize the existence of souls, that person's hypothesis was ridiculed. People called him a failure who had given up on scientific scrutiny to escape into the realm of the occult."

In other words, because souls could possibly exist, what appeared to be phenomena involving the materialization of souls ought to have other explanations that could be established—That was probably what the people laughing at him thought.

There was nothing intrinsically wrong with that kind of attitude. Basilisk's time-erasing ability also could not be explained fully with science. Even so, that ability interfered with the actual existing concept of *time*. Precisely because of that, we were able to take countermeasures against weathering, thus successfully defeating Basilisk.

However, souls were something fleeting and intangible, whose existence was not even clear. Even if something like that could explain Hraesvelgr's ability, we could not formulate countermeasures based on that.

"Ariella—"

"No, I understand even if you don't say it. Even if it's a correct idea, a hypothesis that cannot be applied has no value. However—I believe what I saw were souls."

While saying this, Ariella had an unnatural smile surface on her face, like she was enduring pain and sorrow.

"...Really? In that case, I choose to believe too."

"Huh?"

"Ariella, you're always calm and composed with accurate judgment. Compared to what was said by some scholar whom I've never met, I believe in your instincts more."

I shrugged and voiced a matter-of-fact conclusion.

"...Me too. Since it's coming from you, Ariella, I believe too. I'd be skeptical if it were someone else, but you never lie, Ariella."

Firill also nodded in agreement and held Ariella's hands.

"If souls exist, I think what I said will reach Grandfather. Thank you, Ariella."

"Ooh..."

Ariella went bright red, looking very awkward. I guess she was still the same as before, unused to receiving praise or thanks from others.

"I-I didn't speak to be thanked! N-No need to thank me, I-I'll be on my way!"

Ariella walked towards Ren as though she could not bear the embarrassment.

Left behind, Firill and I looked at each other with a smile.

However, I noticed at this time that there was a change in the crowd. Something seemed to have happened up ahead. The people had stopped walking. The tide of people had halted.

I stood on tiptoe to check out the situation, only to see a costume parade passing through the crossroads ahead.

Pop!

At this moment, small explosions could be heard in the adjacent alley with the rising of white smoke.

Frightened pedestrians flooded in our direction. Walking in front, Kili and Shinomiya-sensei were swallowed by the crowd.

—So the enemy is here!

This was most likely to separate Kili from us.

"Firill, you go and join Mitsuki and the others. Tell them not to move from this spot for now."

"Eh? Mononobe-kun... Where are you going?"

"Please, I'm counting on you!"

Without enough time to answer her, I rushed into the chaotic crowd.

Back at the waterfall, I had already told Kili concisely the enemy's attack approach.

Namely—to move towards places with fewer people.

I forcibly pushed through the crowd and entered a small alley opposite to the smoking location.

Just as I predicted, Kili was there.

"—Aren't you too slow? I'd feel troubled if you don't protect me."

Kili combed her tousled hair with her hand and glared at me. There was a faint scratch on her cheek.

"You were attacked?"

"Yes, it was apparently launched during the earlier flood of people, but this level is nothing to be concerned about."

Kili moved her fingertip along the wound. Immediately, black bubbles of dark matter flowed out and erased the laceration cleanly within the blink of an eye.

"Biogenic transmutation—Seeing it again, it's really amazing."

"So long as I remain conscious, it's possible to heal any wound no matter how severe. However, getting sliced by a blade still hurts, even to the point of infuriating me, making me want to burn the enemy along with everyone in the surroundings to death."

Kili's cold and merciless gaze looked at the streets packed with people.

"...I won't allow that."

Feeling that she was definitely not joking, I warned her seriously.

"Oh my, how scary. Sure, while you're protecting me, I won't do anything to anger you. Then what do we do next?"

Without showing any fear, Kili smiled with delight and asked for my future plans.

"...We will move deliberately to a place where the enemy can easily attack. Once we're there, we'll defeat everyone who comes attacking."

"Okay, very simple. Awesome."

Kili smiled fearlessly.

Hence, we ran deeper in the alley.

Although it was a narrow alley, it was not completely devoid of pedestrians. Running at full speed, passing through a crowd that was heading for the main road, we searched for a deserted location.

Going against the flow of people in this manner for a while, we found a square-shaped open area in the alley. It seemed to be a plot of land left behind after a house was demolished recently.

After confirming there was no one in sight, I said to Kili.

"We'll intercept them over there."

Anti-personnel weapon—AT Nergal.

While running, I generated dark matter and transmuted it into a projectile-based stun gun. Holding Nergal's familiar grip in my hand, I gradually focused.

"Understood. Attacks launched from afar can be handled by my Muspelheim. I'll leave close-range enemies to you."

We stopped in the center of the open space then turned our gaze to the dark alley where the enemy was approaching from.

"—Very well, bring it on."

As soon as Kili said that with a grin, the air temperature in the surroundings rose all at once.

Spreading out tiny dark matter in a broad area to convert into thermal energy, then using it for offense and defense, that was Kili's "Muspelheim."

She had probably deployed a barrier of thermal energy in the surroundings as a precaution against attacks that out-ranged her.

At this moment, there was restless presence coming from the shadows in the alley. The enemy might have decided to attack. I could feel murderous intent stinging my entire body like needles.

...Only one person?

Finally getting a bead on the number of presences, I was surprised by the result.

A muzzle flash came from the depths of the dark alley.

—Sizzle!

But before the bullet could reach us, it vaporized with a red glow.

Due to the intense temperature differential in the air, the surrounding scenery was shimmering in the heat.

Unfazed, the enemy switched to fully automatic fire and shot while approaching. I was struck by the smell of melted metal.

Next, the enemy tossed a cylindrical object between firing. The object exploded in midair, producing white smoke.

The enemy had apparently figured out Muspelheim's weakness.

Dark matter's greatest vulnerability was interference from ordinary matter. Small particles of dark matter would easily get worn away and disappear when covered by smoke. I had tried the same method to break through Muspelheim in the past, but—

"I knew you would take countermeasures of this level."

Kili smiled confidently and dark matter appeared in the surroundings like black snow.

To prevent them from getting worn away by smoke so easily, she had enlarged the dark matter. But all Ds without exception had a limit to the amount of dark matter they could generate in one go.

Increasing the size of each piece of dark matter meant that Muspelheim's range would shrink accordingly.

Seizing that opening, a petite figure stepped into the open space. Running with a low posture as though sticking to the ground, the figure threw a machine gun at us.

As soon as the machine gun entered the range of the fluttering black snow of dark matter, it instantly burned red-hot and exploded from internal expansion.

Amidst the smoke and dust with the smell of gunpowder, the enemy held a large-caliber handgun as a replacement.

We were roughly ten meters apart. At this distance, I finally saw the opponent's face clearly.

Platinum blonde hair fluttered amidst smoke and dust from the explosion. Those golden eyes seemed to pierce everything.

I recognized him. John Hortensia—Sleipnir's *sniper*.

"!"

Realizing his intent, I extended my left palm.

By focusing my consciousness on the muzzle pointed in our direction, I predicted the bullet trajectories.

John would not normally fight on the frontlines like this. Sniping targets from the distance was his job. But in the current situation, there was no one better suited than him for breaching Kili's Muspelheim.

While running, he kept pulling the trigger.

Instead of getting stopped by the barrier of thermal energy, the fired bullets pierced through instead.

The reason was simple. Although the air was filled with dark matter, he was aiming the bullets through the gaps between the dark matter. Kili was creating a thermal energy barrier by transmuting dark matter, which meant vulnerable spots could be found if the positions of all dark matter were acquired from the start.

From a common sense standpoint, this was mere theoretical talk, but John's "eyes" were capable of turning theory into practice. Now that the dark matter was large enough for the naked eye to see, he was matter-of-factly demonstrating his godly aiming skills.

Anti-materiel armor—Damascus 09P!

Knowing his intentions, I had already used transmutation to create shields to block his bullets.

Clang—...!

Manifesting along the bullet trajectories, the heavy armor plating deflected bullets with acute metallic sounds.

"Eh...?"

Seeing bullets pass through Muspelheim, Kili exclaimed in surprise.

"I'll take care of this guy! Kili, you guard against other attacks!"

While saying that, I shot Nergal at John. Nergal was a projectile-base high-voltage electroshock gun almost guaranteed to render the victim unconscious on contact, but John jumped backwards to dodge as though he had predicted my action.

While blocking the line of sight between John and Kili, I rushed forward. Firing Nergal, I dashed out of Muspelheim and closed in.

John frowned and fought back with gunfire.

Since Kili was behind me, I could use armor plating created from transmutation to accurately block John's shots. Exactly because his aim was precise, reading his bullet trajectories was quite easy. John seemed to have no intention of killing me, only aiming at my shoulders and legs.

Seeing me right before his eyes, John reached behind him with his left hand and tossed a certain black object at me.

Anti-explosive armor—Uruk 73E!

Thinking it was a grenade, I instantly deployed anti-explosive armor but what accompanied the blast was a surge of black smoke.

—Another smokescreen...!?

Covering my mouth and nose, I jumped back. Obscured by the smoke, I could not see him.

"What—Uwah!?"

I heard a cry of pain from behind the smoke, then the sound of panicking.

Then the smoke was blown away by the wind, gradually revealing a clear view of the scene.

"Huh?"

The sight rendered me speechless.

John was pinned down on the edge of the open space. The one who had subdued him was my classmate—Ariella Lu.

"I'm not clear on what's happening, but this looks like an enemy, so I captured the enemy first."

Restraining John's joints splendidly, Ariella smiled cheerfully as usual.

Part 5

"Ariella... You're amazing. Although he's a sniper, I can't believe you subdued a member of special forces..."

I felt impressed from the bottom of my heart and praised Ariella who had captured John.

"Although I did sense a different impression from you compared to other girls to begin with—Your combat skills are quite superb."

Approaching from behind, Kili had her arms crossed, staring at Ariella while she spoke.

"Eh? Not really, I have just a bit of martial arts experience. I guess I haven't grown rusty yet. Putting that aside—What are we going to do with this person?"

Ariella gestured to John with her eyes. I honestly did not think Ariella's skills were on the level of "just a bit" but the matter of John was definitely top priority right now.

"Please keep him immobilized like this for now. I've got many questions for him."

"Okay, got it."

Ariella nodded in a relaxed manner. During this time, she did not loosen John's restraints.

I bent down and spoke to John, who had his face down with an expression of chagrin.

"Long time no see, John."

"...It's been a while, captain."

He looked up slightly and replied in what seemed to be a sulking tone.

"I'm no longer a member of Sleipnir. Isn't it weird to call me captain?"

"No sir, you are the captain."

I remarked with a wry smile but John stubbornly insisted on addressing me as "captain" again.

"Fine, address me however you like if you say so. Let's talk about something else. Where's the rest of Sleipnir? Why are you the only one attacking, John?"

I raised the question that bothered me the most. If they truly intended to kill Kili, the entire team should have attacked instead.

"The others are not present because I acted alone without permission... This is insubordination."

"Insubordination? What's going on? Did you guys receive orders to assassinate Kili, John?"

Yesterday, Major Loki had said his side would handle things. Did that not mean he was sending out Sleipnir?

"Until yesterday, that was the case indeed—But orders have changed. The major wants Sleipnir to focus on surveillance then handle the aftermath if any problems arise..."

"Surveillance and clean up... Then someone else is in charge of the actual operation?"

"Yes sir..."

John nodded affirmatively with a gloomy expression.

"...I don't want you to fight that man, captain, which is why I wanted to eliminate Kili before then, because I essentially have a chance at victory... But why did you obstruct me, captain! That woman is a terrorist, equivalent to the public enemy of humanity!"

Despite Ariella's restraints, John still glared at Kili with his golden eyes.

"Midgard has decided to protect Kili—simply that. Rather, what I'm asking is why are you going so far as to disobey orders, to stop me from fighting that guy?"

"...Because I believe... will be killed."

John looked away from me and answered hesitantly.

"Who will be killed?"

"—You, captain."

To me, it was quite a shocking statement.

Sleipnir's members knew my abilities better than anyone. Precisely because they knew, that was why they acknowledged me as their captain.

"I don't know what the others think, but even now, I still respect you, captain. I don't want you to die here, so—"

John was worried for me. He said that guy was stronger than me.

Sure enough... It's him?

The tall man whom Kili said had almost killed her, who felt similar to me.

"What are that guy's characteristics?"

I asked in a dry voice.

"An unidentified man whose entire body is clad in armor. Just as we were departing for this country, Major Loki suddenly brought him. Although we attacked Kili together, because he only follows orders from the major, we were unable to coordinate on the battlefield, resulting in her escape."

John glared resentfully at Kili while replying.

"What's that guy's name?"

I gulped and made the final confirmation.

"—Hreidmar. That was what Major Loki called him."

After asking John the necessary questions, I confiscated his gun and released him.

"Captain... I believe that you should personally take care of that woman before that guy arrives."

He glared at Kili and warned me before disappearing into the depths of the dark alley.

"You allowed him to escape. Personally, I wanted to kill him, but you'll stop me, right?"

"That's right."

"What a shame. I wanted to vaporize him."

Kili shrugged and sighed.

"—Don't say that kind of stuff again if you really intend to go to Midgard. Vaporize this if you need to vaporize something."

Saying that, I handed her my Nergal and the gun confiscated from John. Both were dangerous items inappropriate to bring back.

"You leave me no choice."

Kili took the two guns and tossed them into the air.

The guns expanded from heat and exploded like fireworks.

"Woah! Why did they explode?"

Not knowing about Kili's Muspelheim, Ariella widened her eyes in surprise.

"Oh, just now, that's—"

While making our way back to the main street where Firill and the others were waiting, I explained Kili's Muspelheim to Ariella then briefly recounted what had happened.

NIFL had mobilized to eliminate Kili. The one in command was my former superior officer. Iris and the others had no experience in human combat, hence to avoid getting them caught up, I intended to take care of things with just Kili. After listening to me about all this, Ariella spoke to me, slightly angered.

"I know roughly what happened now, but I can't approve the fact that you didn't tell anyone about your plan. Everyone must be worried, right?"

"I know that... But I want to avoid getting the others involved in conflicts between humans as much as possible."

If I told them about the plan, Iris and the others would definitely try to help.

As much as I worried about their safety, what unsettled me more was that the powers they had trained for dragon combat were too powerful.

If they accidentally killed someone due to lack of control—As soon as this thought crossed my mind, I became unable to discuss with them.

"But... Perhaps one of them might be worried and come chasing after you like me. So your solution is still not the best."

"Yeah, I'll apologize to everyone when we get back."

Because Ariella did chase after me in fact, I could not retort.

"Yeah, that'd be best. Umm—Umm, I've got a question too, about the person just now."

"You mean John?"

I asked and Ariella nodded.

"So, is John the first name?"

"Yeah."

"Are you sure? It's not a nickname?"

"Yeah... But why are you asking?"

I frowned, unable to understand what Ariella was getting at.

"Hmm, it just bothers me a little..."

Ariella clutched her right hand then cocked her head in puzzlement.

"...?"

Not knowing what was bothering her, I could not help but start to ponder.

"Mononobe-kun, are you close with that person?"

"Yeah, I think he's the one who admired me the most back in Sleipnir."

"Oh, that's right, it seems that person went as far as to disobey orders for your sake. If that's the case, sure enough..."

"What do you mean, sure enough?"

Seeing Ariella figuring things out on her own, I asked her.

"Hmm... I don't think this is something for me to reveal. And it's possible I could be mistaken."

"I totally don't get what you're talking about..."

Seeing Ariella wave her hands with a wry smile, I could not help but sigh.

"Ahaha, if you're curious no matter what, try asking for the real name the next time you see that person. I think everything will be all clear if you do that."

In other words, John was using a fake name? But how would Ariella know something like that?

Ariella's reply simply baffled me.

But listening in on the side, Kili murmured with great interest:

"Oh... This seems quite amusing. Perhaps I was right not to vaporize that person."

Kili's expression looked like she figured out something. A smile surfaced on her lips.

—What was going on?

It felt like Kili and Ariella had left me behind. While pondering the meaning of what Ariella had said, I walked but could not think of anything related to John's name.

As soon as we got back to the main street, I could see that things had calmed down. The initial explosion was probably just a smokescreen. Although the police could be seen in the smoking alley, the townsfolk did not seem fazed at all and were still enjoying the festivities. Brynhildr Class was assembled by the roadside.

"Oh, Nii-san!"

Mitsuki instantly ran over as soon as she spotted me.

After that, I explained what had happened—As expected, I ended up subjected to harsh lecturing.

Part 6

After getting attacked, we left the scene first and returned to the palace.

Although it was slightly earlier than scheduled, since the "Konsousai" or Soul Departure Rite was starting tonight at Erlia Castle and we were going to attend the opening ceremony, we originally intended to return before evening in the first place.

Although the town was starting to liven up already, this funeral ceremony of the Soul Departure Rite apparently had its official start after sundown.

After a brief break in our rooms, we changed into clothing appropriate for the ceremony and went to Erlia Castle. This time, we took a high-class limo.

All the girls were dressed in the same gorgeous dresses from the dinner party last night. The scene inside the car looked very glamorous.

After passing through the castle wall's main gate where there were many people lined up, the limo entered the heart of the castle through the western gate which seemed to be exclusive to involved parties.

"Wow..."

Pressed against the car window, Tia exclaimed in wonderment.

The castle's spires were lit very beautifully, shrouded in an atmosphere both solemn and fantastical.

The palace was magnificent too but this place really seemed like it came from another world. It was like entering a realm of fantasy.

However, I currently could not immerse myself in such stirrings of emotion.

Although everyone was chatting with smiles, part of our attention was still diverted to vigilance against the surrounding situation.

Hreidmar. The instant I heard this name from John, I could not relax for a single moment.

Even though Mitsuki had warned me "not to take action alone again"... I was the only one capable of engaging him in battle. And this time, I was not going to enlist Kili's aid.

"Please come this way, everyone. I will lead you to your special seating."

Led by Helen-san, we entered the castle. The stone-built interior was quite cold, honestly.

But after going up the stairs and passing through a massive door, the air warmed up slightly.

I could hear the noisy crowds. Over there was a viewing balcony overlooking a vast hall on the ground floor.

A massive portrait was hanging in the deepest end of the hall. Under the portrait was a coffin covered in flowers.

"Grandfather..."

Firill murmured softly while looking at the portrait and the coffin.

So that was King Albert...?

An old man with a white beard was staring from the portrait with a sharp gaze. He looked like someone with great strength of will. I could feel from the portrait that he had certain traits sufficient to change his country and the world.

Once the hall was packed full of people, Firill's father, Prince Alfred, ascended the stage and greeted them.

The ceremony began in a more solemn atmosphere than imagined. First, a long moment of silence was dedicated to the deceased. The originally noisy interior of the castle instantly fell silent.

Firill closed her eyes with a solemn expression on her face. Surely she was silently thinking of her grandfather. If what Ariella had said was true and souls really existed, then her prayers ought to reach her grandfather.

Following her lead, the others and I offered our silent prayers.

—If it's thanks to you that the present Midgard came to be, I thank you wholeheartedly. Thank you for creating a home for us.

Then the silent prayers ended. Originally a bit dim, the hall's lighting suddenly brightened. Originally on standby, the orchestra started playing gentle music.

The hall instantly turned into a party venue and people went out to dance one after another.

There seemed to be other venues inside the castle. Originally concentrated together, the crowds followed directions and gradually dispersed.

Seeing the mood change so rapidly, I felt a little troubled but I already knew that it was this country's unique way of seeing off the deceased.

Dancing in front of the royal coffin, the people also looked a bit mournful.

"—Watching is too boring. Shall we dance too?"

Looking at the hall from the balcony, Kili asked us.

"I believe we should stay out of the spotlight... Your life is being targeted, you know?"

However, Mitsuki showed hesitation on her face.

"Don't worry, the royal family is here, so security inside the castle is tight. And there are so many people watching. The enemy isn't stupid enough to pick this location to make a move."

After saying that optimistically, Kili took my hand.

"Come, dance with me."

"H-Hey!?"

Kili pulled me, wanting to exit the audience seating.

"Ah! Don't take Mononobe away!"

"Tia wants to dance with Yuu too!"

Iris and Tia chased after us.

"...No helping it. Lisa-san, let us go as well."

"Because we must watch her closely."

Mitsuki and Lisa sighed and walked over.

"Ren, let's go too. There seems to be lots of good food."

"Mm."

Ariella and Ren followed.

"...I will watch from here."

However, Firill, Shinomiya-sensei and Helen-san both stayed in the audience seating area.

The majority of people present probably knew that Firill was a princess of the Principality of Erlia as well as a D. If she appeared in the party and caused a commotion, then it would expose the fact that Midgard had sent Ds to receive Kili. Surely, she must have made her choice in consideration of that.

With Kili holding my hand, I was led to the hall on the ground floor.

"I don't have any ballroom dancing experience, okay?"

"No problem. I will teach you. You'd look super lame unless you learn enough to lead those girls in a dance, right?"

Kili looked at Iris and the others who had followed us to the hall, then she immediately started to move with dance steps.

"Woah..."

I moved my feet frantically to follow her.

"Come, right foot, left foot—That's right, very good. Now just repeat these steps."

"O-Okay."

Kili guided me very well and the step patterns turned out to be unexpectedly simple. Hence, I quickly regained composure. As long as I thought of dancing as martial arts forms, it was not too hard, actually.

After getting used to dancing, I now had the luxury of attention to spare on other things.

"...What's the matter?"

At a distance almost close enough to kiss, Kili smiled. Beneath her black dress, her soft bosom was touching me.

The sensation was making my heart race.

Perhaps it was perfume, a flowery fragrance was rising in front of my chest, tickling my nose lightly. Inconspicuous lipstick had been put on her lips, making them look very seductive.

Due to wariness against her until now, I had not noticed particularly, but dancing with her black hair fluttering, she was extremely beautiful.

"N-Nothing."

However, I felt resistant to offering my honest thoughts, so I looked away and tried to cover things up.

"You can only look at your partner during a dance. This is manners. Don't look away from me."

"Guh... G-Got it."

I stared straight into Kili's black pupils. She smiled contentedly.

"Indeed, that's the way."

With coordinated steps, we danced along with the music.

"—Yuu, what is Hreidmar?"

Kili whispered while dancing.

"It's the name of the assassin who's trying to take your life."

"That's not what I mean. I am asking you what kind of existence is he?"

"Is there any point in asking that?"

Hearing my question, Kili stared into my eyes, nodded and said:

"Yes, because I want to know you better."

"Isn't that way too selfish of you, given how much you're hiding already?"

I frowned and answered.

"Fufu—Perhaps. Then how about this? If you tell me about Hreidmar... I could answer one question of yours."

I was surprised to hear her offering terms of exchange that were more advantageous than I expected. If one of her secrets could be revealed... Then I had no choice but to agree.

"—Got it. Hreidmar is apparently my... reference."

"Reference? In other words, your master?"

"No, it's different from a master-apprentice relationship. I've never talked to Hreidmar or fought him. I simply watched his way of fighting and memorized it, that's all."

Actually, rather than memorize, it was more like getting charmed or possessed. But this was probably a type of feeling that only I could understand.

"Oh... In other words, your *ferocity* comes from him?"

"Something like that. Although I've gone through lots of harsh combat training, I believe the way I am now stems from having watched him."

"It almost sounds like contamination."

Kili frowned and murmured, expressing the poignant feelings I had deliberately withheld.

"Yes... So that's why Hreidmar and I possess similar traits. That's probably the part that you found similar between me and him."

"No, you two are different. Although I described you as similar before, I can't feel from him the kind of charm that you have."

Kili asserted with an inexplicably forceful tone. Staring into my eyes, her gaze was filled with burning passion.

"After hearing about Hreidmar, I am even more certain of it. What attracts me is a certain characteristic deeper inside of you. The *ferocity* residing within you, to me, it might be... a troublesome rival instead."

Kili grinned.

"A rival? What the heck kind of rival..."

"I'm not sure either, this purely a woman's intuition. But apart from me, others already have their sights on you."

Saying that, she instantly leaned her body against me.

"So don't lower your guard... I won't forgive you... if you easily let yourself become someone else's posession."

Devoured by the intense emotions residing in her words and gaze, I felt my breath taken away for a moment.

But when the music changed songs, I came back to my senses and pulled Kili towards me according to the new melody.

"—I don't need your permission for anything. Rather, it's time for me to ask questions."

"Oh my, you're really leading forcefully. But following an intense lead like this is not bad either. Very well, what do you want to ask?"

Kili showed surprise on her face but soon showed a smile of delight.

"Who are you? If it's something even you don't know... Then tell me the reason why you don't know."

I repeated the question I had asked her many times, but this time, I cornered her.

"Sure, this is the promise, but—"

Despite nodding in agreement, Kili struggled free from my arm.

"—There seems to be other girls in line, so I shall excuse myself for now."

Slightly farther away, Iris and Tia were glaring in our direction. Mitsuki also looked extremely displeased.

"H-Hey!"

I tried to stop Kili from leaving but she gracefully dodged my hand.

"Don't be anxious. I will keep my promise. I'll dance with you again later."

Smiling seductively, Kili then walked over to the tables with food.

"Yuu is so much like a prince!"

I first danced with Tia according to the orchestra's music. Although it was tough due to our height difference, after I got used to coordinating our steps, we were able to dance smoothly.

"I see you're wearing that brooch now as well."

Tia was wearing a pink pearl dress. Pinned on her chest was the brooch I had bought for her from a roadside vendor.

"Yes! Tia picked a dress to match this brooch!"

"You like it that much..."

Seeing Tia smile with great contentment, I could not help but smile.

—Will Iris be equally happy?

I still had not given Iris the hairpin I had bought for her. It was still sitting in the inside pocket of my suit.

Then the song ended. Finished with my dance with Tia, I went straight for Iris.

"Then it's my turn?"

Iris asked with a blush. She looked like she was clearly thinking about what happened during the daytime. She was probably still mistakenly thinking I wanted to kiss her. Fine, I guess I'll clear up that misunderstanding while we're dancing—

"Yeah, but before we dance, I want to give this to you first."

"Eh...?"

Holding the butterfly hairpin in her hand, Iris showed surprise.

"It's a present for you."

"W-Why? It's not my birthday today, you know?"

Iris asked me, bewildered.

"No, it's not a birthday present. I simply thought that it'd look good on you, Iris. If you don't like it, I don't mind if you return it—"

Since Iris did not look too happy, I explained in a slight fluster. However, she clasped the hairpin tightly in both hands and shook her head forcefully.

"N-Not at all! This is very pretty... I'm so happy, thank you, Mononobe."

Iris thanked me slightly tearfully.

"Really? That's good to know."

I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Mononobe, how is it? Does it look weird?"

Iris immediately put on the hairpin to show me.

"Not weird at all, it looks great."

"Ehehe, I'm so glad."

Iris smiled happily and held my hand.

"Then let's dance, Mononobe!"

Thus, I started dancing to the music.

While carefully guiding Iris' steps, I explained what happened at the waterfall.

"—I see, Mononobe, so you weren't trying to kiss Firill-chan."

"Yeah, you got the wrong idea, Iris."

Seeing the misunderstanding finally cleared up, I nodded with relief.

"So, you don't want to... kiss me either?"

"Huh? W-Well—'"

I did not know how to answer. My gaze wandered. It would be too embarrassing to answer honestly.

"Fufu, you're so easy to understand, Mononobe."

Iris smiled. She looked like she could see right into my mind.

"Gah..."

Were my thoughts that easy to read from my face? I felt a little indignant.

"Seriously, don't be unhappy. I'll keep my promise."

"By promise, you don't mean to say—"

I recalled what Iris had said during the daytime.

"Yes... Wait until we're alone, because I... want to kiss you too, Mononobe."

Iris blushed and whispered quietly extremely up close.

Then the music changed. As though unable to bear her embarrassment, she fled before my eyes.

"Iris, you're quite easy to read too."

Watching her run away from me, I remarked with a wry smile.

Now I was left alone. Just as I looked around, thinking what to do next, I saw Mitsuki approaching me.

Now it occurred to me, speaking of which, it would be nice if I had bought something for Mitsuki too.

When I knew that I only had enough money for one more accessory, I chose a present for Iris without a second thought.

Had I not lost my memories, perhaps the hairpin would have been a present to Mitsuki rather than Iris—

These thoughts flashed through my mind, filling my heart with a painful sense of guilt.

"Excuse me... Nii-san, may I dance with you too?"

Hence, when Mitsuki extended her hand, I hesitated for a moment. Did I have the right to hold her hand?

"No...?"

But seeing a gloomy and uneasy expression on Mitsuki's face, I instantly woke up. Right now, making her sad would be even more wrong.

"Of course you may. Let's dance."

I forced a smile and held Mitsuki's hand.

"This... is my first time."

As I put my arm around her waist, Mitsuki blushed.

"This is my first time too."

I answered while guiding Mitsuki, allowing her to step naturally.

"For a first time, Nii-san, you are dancing very well."

"Well, that's because I've already danced with three people. By the fourth, I've gotten used to it no matter what."

"Hmph..."

For some reason, Mitsuki suddenly exuded an aura of displeasure.

"What's wrong?"

"Nii-san, I feel you are lacking in delicacy after all."

After that, Mitsuki danced with a scowl on her face. Before I could figure out the reason, the music changed and Mitsuki left me.

Was I unable to understand Mitsuki's displeasure because I had lost my memories? If possible, I hope it was simply because I was too dense.

I sighed and was just about to return to the others when—

"Mononobe Yuu! You seem to think you can dance now, but the way I see it, you still have far to go! I shall make you understand the gap between our abilities. Your next dance is with me!"

Lisa suddenly grabbed my arm and forcibly took me to the center of the hall.

"H-Hey!?"

"What's the matter? Do you dislike dancing with me?"

"No, that's not it... Rather, are you okay with me being your partner?"

Hearing me ask in return, Lisa blushed slightly.

"I-I am simply trying to teach you how to dance properly. I-It's not like I want to dance with you!"

"R-Really? Then thank you for instructing me."

Overwhelmed by Lisa's forcefulness, I started to dance.

Her dancing was truly masterful.

"See, your movements have gone coercive again. You must be more considerate for your partner."

Her advice was very accurate and to the point. I learned a lot from her, but—

Squish. Squish.

More voluptuous than any of my earlier partners, her bosom was pressing strongly against me, making it impossible for me to focus on dancing.

The sensation of an extremely soft and bountiful chest was making me dizzy.

"—As one would expect, you lack experience. If you ask me, I could instruct you some more in the future. Work hard and improve yourself."

Ultimately, I still did not pass in Lisa's eyes. Mentally exhausted, I felt my body swaying unsteadily and my gaze wandered.

Ariella and Ren were busy eating and did not look like they intended to dance. Then next, I should dance again with Kili according to the promise and have her answer the earlier question.

I walked around, looking for Kili, then found her at at a door on the side of the hall.

I was just about to speak to her when she smiled and waved lightly for me to come over. Then she turned around, her black hair and dress fluttering behind her, and passed through the door.

I went through the doorway to chase her. Immediately, a cold night breeze caressed my cheek.

This was a corridor traversing the courtyard inside the castle. Kili was waiting for me next to a flowerbed where white flowers were blooming. No other people were in sight.

"You can hear the music faintly too. How about a dance here?"

Kili extended her hand lightly towards me, inviting me to dance.

"Yeah... It's not bad at all."

I left the corridor, walked into the courtyard and took Kili's hand.

The music leaking out from the hall was carried by the wind across the courtyard. We began to dance to the tide of music.

"—I have no idea what other existence is the same as mine."

Staring into my eyes, Kili spoke in a whisper. Her statement was possibly the answer to my question earlier.

"I am neither human nor a D. If anything, I'd be a dragon, but not a true dragon either, so I have no idea what word to use to describe myself. This kind of answer—Is it not enough?"

"Not enough. Since you said you're different, can you tell me how you're different?"

Dancing with Kili in the courtyard with blooming flowers, I asked her.

"I see... First of all, I don't have human parents."

"No parents?"

This was hard to understand. Without parents, how exactly was she born in this world?

Perhaps reading the question from my expression, Kili smiled with a bit of sadness.

"I was born from thin air."

"How could that be possible...?"

"Oh my? Why are you surprised? Clearly you're *capable of creating many things out of thin air*."

Kili cocked her head and stared into my eyes.

Realizing what she meant—Understanding what Kili was trying to say, I was instantly speechless.

"No way..."

"Just as you imagine, I am an existence born from dark matter."

Kili calmly revealed her origins.

Creating life through the transmutation of dark matter, that was impossible for Ds who were unable to perform biogenic transmutation.

If something was capable of doing that—

"You're Vritra's...?"

"Yes, I am some kind of creation made by the black dragon—'Black' Vritra—using dark matter. How's that? Am I a monster surpassing your imagination?"

Kili laughed with self-abuse and asked me.

"No wait... Didn't you call Hekatonkheir 'mother' last time?"

"Fufu—Did I? I never stated explicitly that Hekatonkheir was my mother."

"That's not what happened, you clearly—"

"Yes, that's right. You saw me address as mother *the thing you people call Hekatonkheir*, but that's all."

Kili continued my sentence in a very suggestive manner.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You don't get it? With just a bit of thought, you should be able to figure it out."

Kili narrowed her eyes and spoke as though taunting me.

"—But I won't verify your answer, because I only promised to tell you one secret."

After saying that, Kili withdrew her hand that was originally on top of mine, pulling herself away. The music from the hall happened to stop at that moment. The surroundings returned to the silence of night.

"I leave for you to decide whether or not to report to Midgard what you just heard. Do as you wish."

"...!"

I clenched my fist and glared at her. Kili was wording things in such an unfair way.

She was telling me to decide what kind of existence to view her as. If I told her origins to Midgard, she would most likely be seen as a dragon. Conversely, if I did not report her, she would probably be welcomed into Midgard as a D.

She was hinting here for me to decide what she was, but...

'I too believe that how she lives her life... is far more important than what she is.'

Principal Charlotte's words flashed across my mind. While watching Tia wavering in the gap between humans and dragons, she had said these words as though in a prayer.

"What do you want to do?"

"Eh?"

Kili looked surprised and made a questioning sound.

"Midgard's principal once said—How you live is more important than what you are. By her own will, Tia decided to live as a human. So don't leave it to others, decide yourself."

"I definitely act according to my own decisions. Although I asked you to decide, I never said I was going to follow your conclusion."

"Then there's no point asking me to decide, right?"

"—On the contrary, I could confirm how you viewed me."

Kili smiled mischievously and looked up at me.

Useless but not without meaning—Basically something like that.

I exhaled, gave up resisting and decided to tell her my current thoughts honestly.

"I believe you're human Kili."

"Oh, and why is that?"

"—Because I believe I can kill you. What I inherited from Hreidmar were skills for the purpose of killing humans. I can kill you, which means you're human."

Hearing me tell her so directly, Kili laughed with shaking shoulders.

"Fufu... Ahahaha—What an awful reason, but it's very much in your style."

While she was like that, I continued:

"I won't deliberately treat you as a dragon, human as you are. I won't tell anyone what you said earlier, unless—You choose to become a dragon."

"...Then I need to express my gratitude to you first. Thank you."

Wiping away her tears from laughing too hard, Kili thanked me. However, she did not mention at all what she was going to do. Seriously, what a sly girl.

"It's almost time to head back. I'm starting to feel cold."

Trying to get more information out of Kili's lips was probably impossible, so I urged her to leave the courtyard where cold wind was blowing, to return to the hall.

"Yeah—"

Kili nodded but at that very moment, we both noticed at the same time—

Something was approaching from the depths of the courtyard surrounded by towering walls.

Inside the courtyard where pale moonlight was shining, a tall figure appeared.

"I said earlier that the enemy would not be stupid enough to attack at this kind of place, but looks like I was wrong."

Kili spoke with a wry smile.

Hidden behind shadows, a man dressed in a hooded black coat was stepping on the flowers in the flowerbed, gradually closing in on us. The hard luster of armor could be seen beneath the hood. Without a doubt, this guy was—

"—Hreidmar."

I muttered the name that stood for that guy.

He did not answer. I did not even know if he heard me.

"Stand down, Kili. If I can kill you, he can surely kill you too. So no matter what happens, don't enter the fray."

"Got it. You don't need cover fire either, right?"

"That's right. If you take action while trying to help me, it'll end up creating fatal openings instead. Please just protect your own life."

After answering Kili's question, I stepped forward.

Anti-armor weapon—Enlil.

Generating dark matter from my right hand, I converted it into a weapon for fighting him.

Compared to Nergal, Enlil's barrel was longer with an unnaturally large muzzle. This was for adding special vibrations to the fired bullets, and also because it was a lost weapon. Although I had provided the specs to NIFL, due to its overly complicated design, NIFL gave up on mass producing this weapon.

No matter how sturdy the armor the enemy was hiding under, the vibration bullets fired by Enlil would transmit the impact inside. Against this guy who was wearing armor, Nergal probably would not work as an electroshock gun, so I had to rely on Enlil.

Since this was not a weapon that injured the enemy directly, it was relatively low in damage. Compared to anti-materiel rifles and fictional armaments, the chances of inflicting a lethal wound on the enemy were probably lower.

"....."

Even after seeing me raise my weapon, Hreidmar still did not change his pace.

His hands were hidden inside his coat. That was quite tricky because it prevented me from knowing his method of attack and range.

Under such circumstances, leaving initiative in enemy hands would be very dangerous. I must attack first to reduce the enemy's options.

Focusing, I awakened "Fafnir" that was sleeping in the depths of my consciousness.

My senses expanded, as though reaching omniscience—

"!?"

Death was already before my eyes.

Glinting brightly under the moonlight, the sharp tip of a knife aimed straight between my eyes.

I reflexively swung Enlil and deflected the knife with the gun's body.

He had probably thrown the knife from inside the coat without any preparatory motion. I did not expect it at all.

Within the brief instant when my attention was focused on the knife, he disappeared from view.

"!?"

I instantly felt a chill along my spine. A silver glint flashed past the right side of my view.

I looked right to see Hreidmar there with a black gun in his hand.

A deep abyss—The muzzle with the darkness of death was staring straight at me.

Immediately, a bullet was shot, accompanied by a muzzle flash.

I tried to use Enlil in my right hand to defend but was too late. The bullet pierced my right wrist but thanks to that, it changed the trajectory slightly, causing the bullet to fly past my ear.

My mind was attacked by a scorching sensation of heat and pain coming from my right hand.

"Damn it!"

I swung my right arm, splattering the spurting blood on Hreidmar. Silver-white armor, exposed under the hood, became stained with droplets of my blood.

Perhaps I succeeded in blocking his view. His movements halted for an instant. Seizing the opening, I switched Enlil to my left hand then fired consecutively until I was out of ammo.

With the sound of a hard impact, his coat was ripped into many pieces.

Hreidmar had used his right arm's armor to deflect the first shot then dodged the remainder by moving his body.

Managing to pull some distance away at last, I used transmutation to refill Enlil's bullets then aimed the muzzle at him.

Hreidmar's right arm was dangling powerlessly inside the hole in his coat. The gun he was originally holding had also fallen on the ground. Struck by a vibration bullet, his right arm should be paralyzed temporarily and out of commission.

Despite suffering a severe blow from him, I should be on equal terms with him now.

This conclusion of mine did not last for long. Hreidmar lifted his right arm then opened and clenched his hand repeatedly as though to confirm the feeling.

You must be kidding me—He can already move that arm?

I gnashed my teeth in disbelief.

Most likely, he must have deflected the bullet with optimal timing and angle, minimizing the impact.

Forget about being on equal terms. I was being cornered, unable to fight back. Blood dripped down my right hand, stealing my body warmth. Apart from pain, my right hand could not feel anything.

—To think there was such a large gap between him and me.

This man, who had fascinated me in the past, turned out to be more powerful than imagined.

Furthermore, my senses seemed more sluggish than during the previous fight against Kili. Normally, I could use my willpower to cut off my sense of pain, but I was unable to do so now.

Perhaps due to my unwillingness to become more of a *killer* than Hreidmar, I was subconsciously suppressing my "Fafnir."

Most likely, I hated myself for continuing to become something else.

I forbade myself from getting even farther from the "me" whom Mitsuki knew.

"....."

With his head armor stained by my blood, Hreidmar wielded a combat knife to replace the gun he had dropped. What was he going to deprive me of next? My left arm? A leg? Or my life?

Unable to shake off my doubts, I applied more pressure on Enlil's trigger.

—Bwahhhhhhh...

Just as Hreidmar and I were about to engage again, the sky suddenly became noisy.

A strong gust of wind blew across the courtyard, sending white petals fluttering through the air.

"Looks like I was ultimately discovered..."

I heard Kili's quiet words coming from outside my view.

Hreidmar stopped attacking. Clad in armor, his face looked up at the sky. I had no idea what the heck he saw but he jumped backwards forcefully, turned his back to me then ran towards the castle wall to leave.

"What...?"

I did not take my eyes off him and stared while used something like a wire to climb over the castle wall.

Most likely, there was something in the sky, forcing him to retreat despite the overwhelming odds in his favor.

I clipped Enlil on my belt. Pressing on my right wrist's wound with my left hand, I looked up at the night sky where a strong wind was blowing.

A golden light was crossing the sky above the Principality of Erlia.

"That's—"

I muttered hoarsely and widened my eyes in surprise.

It was not a shooting star, hence it did not crash straight to the ground. Instead, it was circling widely in the night sky.

The flying glow in the sky was shaped like a giant bird.

An image I had only seen on photos before was right there.

"The yellow dragon—'Yellow' Hraesvelgr... Why is it here—"

I muttered the name of the monster flying in the sky.

"The true enemy has finally arrived, that's all."

Hearing Kili's calm voice, I shifted my gaze downwards.

With a faint smile, she was approaching me. Then without worrying about bloodstains, she wrapped her hands around my wound.

Immediately, tiny dark matter flowed from between her hands. The pain vanished as though it never existed.

She removed her hands. The gunshot wound inflicted by Hreidmar had disappeared without a trace.

"You used biogenic transmutation... to heal it?"

"Yes, I must ask you to fight next, so it'd be a problem if you fainted from bloodloss."

Kili answered solemnly then looked up into the sky.

Hraesvelgr was leaving golden trails in the night sky, circling in the air above the Principality of Erlia. Its altitude also seemed to be gradually decreasing.

"Don't tell me... it intends to land here—"

"Indeed, Hraesvelgr is descending while looking for my location."

Saying that, Kili rolled up her sleeve, exposing her right arm to the night air.

Like yesterday, her arm was wrapped with a bandage.

Capable of using biogenic transmutation, just as she had healed my wound just now, she did not need to treat her injuries in this manner.

Then why—Why did she put on a bandage?

An ominous feeling bordering on certainty rose up in my mind.

Yeah... Why hadn't I thought of this possibility earlier? I should have used my earlier question to ask about the bandage instead.

Then at least, I would have had some time, no matter how short, to think of countermeasures.

"Whether Sleipnir or Hreidmar, neither of them are actually threats to me. Even if they have the power to kill me, I could just flee. But... That's different."

Saying that, Kili untied her bandage.

"Once discovered, it's absolutely impossible to flee. That's why I sought Midgard's—no, your—help."

Yellow light was leaking out from gaps in the loosened bandage. It was Kili's dragon mark glowing.

"Yuu, you will—protect me, right?"

Showing me her dragon mark that had changed in color, she asked me that.

Chapter 3 - “Yellow” Hraesvelgr

Part 1

From Firill Crest's perspective, her grandfather Albert Crest was a very distant figure.

Although she could see her grandfather every Sunday at the dinner party where the entire family gathered, he would finish his meal in an instant then leave the table due to busy matters to attend to. When she saw him occasionally in the palace, he was often scolding others. Firill inexplicably feared him. Furthermore, she thought that he was probably uninterested in her.

However, when Firill awakened as a D, he had roared in anger at the Asgard staff visiting the palace:

"What kind of joke is this!? How could I allow my granddaughter to be locked away in a some kind of detention facility!?"

After that, he changed the world in a few short years. While calling for the protection of the Ds' human rights and supporting Midgard's independence, he kept refusing the extradition of Firill.

Although he was still the same, always leaving the dinner party in a rush without speaking much to Firill, still giving her the same sense of distance as before—

Firill kept trying to find the chance to convey certain words to him. But she feared the grandfather who always seemed angry. Even when she found a chance, she did not dare to talk to him. Finally, time came for Firill to leave the country.

Since Midgard had gotten on track as a self-governed educational institute, he decided that the system was sufficiently perfected.

Due to illness, her grandfather was absent from the dinner party before her departure. Hence, in the end, Firill never got to tell him those words.

"...Grandfather is still so distant."

From the viewing balcony, looking out at the coffin and portrait in the hall inside Erlia Castle, Firill murmured quietly to herself.

The distance between them still felt the same as back then.

While praying silently, she kept repeating certain words she had been unable to voice all this time—but she could not feel that she had conveyed them to her grandfather.

Ariella had said that souls existed. Firill did not think it was a lie. However, Firill did not know where his soul was located.

"Souls—If only they were visible."

Then Firill would be able to convey those words directly to him.

But of course, that kind of wish was equivalent to daydreaming.

When Firill sighed gloomily, a noisy commotion suddenly started in the hall.

Entering the door, people pointed outside and seemed to be saying something.

—Hraesvelgr.

She seemed to hear that word.

Part 2

"No choice—I'll protect you!"

I grabbed Kili's arm and ran back to the hall. The calamity was probably known already. It was a bit noisy in the hall and the orchestra had stopped playing too.

I looked around and found Mitsuki then I brought Kili over to her.

"Mitsuki!"

"...N-Nii-san! What happened to your hand!?"

Seeing my blood spattered right hand, Mitsuki asked shrilly. Originally a bit farther away, Iris, Lisa, Ariella, Ren and Tia all gathered to see what was going on.

"Oh, my wound is fine, it's already healed. What's more important is this, look."

Saying that, I showed Kili's dragon mark, which had turned yellow, to Mitsuki and the girls.

"What—"

They all stared at Kili's arm, too surprised to speak.

"Hraesvelgr is here."

Then I summed up the current situation. Mitsuki immediately showed comprehension on her face.

"I see—So this is the situation."

Swiftly figuring things out, Mitsuki glared at Kili.

"Indeed, this is the situation."

Kili nodded nonchalantly to concur.

"Although I have things to say... I will put them aside for now."

Mitsuki remarked bitterly then turned her gaze to the viewing balcony on the second floor where we were taken to earlier.

"Shinomiya-sensei, Level A alert! Type Yellow! We will intercept, Sensei, so please lead the ordinary people to evacuate!"

Perhaps to avoid the chaos to spread further, Mitsuki used Midgard's alert jargon to report the situation to Shinomiya-sensei.

"—Understood."

From the balcony, Shinomiya-sensei nodded. Next to her, Firill also leaned out.

"I will head over immediately!"

"No, Firill-san, please remain in the hall! Someone needs to protect Kili-san and the people here."

"...Got it."

After hearing Firill's response, Mitsuki called to us.

"Everyone, let us move out. First go outdoors to confirm the target visually."

We left Kili in the hall and ran outside.

"Eh? Eh? What's going on?"

Iris still seemed unsure of the situation. While running, she asked in puzzlement.

"Yuu, what does 'this is the situation' mean?"

Because things developed too suddenly, Tia had not caught up either.

"You just saw the dragon mark whose color had changed, right? Hraesvelgr's target is Kili. To prevent Kili from turning into a dragon, we must intercept Hraesvelgr."

"Ehhh!? We have to fight now? What if I get the dress dirty..."

Hearing what I said, Iris looked down at the white dress she was wearing. Although something was off with her worries, since she still had the luxury of worrying about something like that, there was no problem.

What concerned me more was Ariella who seemed occupied in her thoughts.

"—Hraesvelgr."

As though squeezing out her voice, Ariella murmured the name of the invading dragon, then gritted her teeth hard.

Passing through the door leading to the corridor, we then rushed into the courtyard. Immediately, we were greeted by strong wind blowing straight at us.

I looked up into the sky to see the giant golden bird that happened to fly past. Its body looked bigger than before.

Although it was difficult to get a sense of distance, it looked like Hraesvelgr was descending from quite a high altitude.

"That is Hraesvelgr. Although it frequently passes near Midgard's territorial waters, this is my first time seeing it from so near."

Lisa commented while looking up at the giant bird flying in the night sky.

"Hraesvelgr is infamous for rendering all kinds of attacks ineffective. However, we have no need to be pessimistic, because we possess what has never been tested before—Powerful means of attack."

Saying that, Mitsuki instantly issued orders to us.

"Lisa-san and Ren-san, cooperate to fire a positron cannon of maximum firepower. I will borrow Iris-san's dark matter to fire an extra large antimatter missile. Nii-san, please attack with anti-dragon armaments with Tia-san's assistance! Ariell-san, deploy barriers as necessary!"

"Affirmative!"

We all answered in unison then taking positions some distance apart from one another, we looked up at the sky.

"Gungnir!"

Lisa generated her fictional armament of a spear then Ren enlarged it.

"Brionac!"

Mitsuki borrowed Iris' dark matter to create a fictional armament of a bow, several times larger than usual.

"Tia, I'm counting on you."

The amount of dark matter I could generate at a time was extremely small. To create gigantic anti-dragon armaments, I needed to borrow dark matter from others.

"Great! Tia's power is all yours, Yuu."

Tia nodded and held my left hand.

I raised my right hand and materialized the weapon from an ancient civilization.

"Special artillery—Megiddo!"

Borrowing the dark matter flowing from Tia, I constructed a giant cannon pointing at the sky.

Controlling the cannon that was linked to my consciousness, I aimed at Hraesvelgr in the air.

"—Aegis."

Ariella equipped her gauntlet-shaped fictional armament and stayed on guard against attacks from Hraesvelgr.

"It is still outside attack range. Please wait until it approaches before attacking! If Hraesvelgr's target is Kili-san, it will surely land in this castle."

Mitsuki shouted to us after we were all ready, then nocked an arrow of dark matter onto her fictional armament.

Hraesvelgr was gradually circling over a smaller area. It was probably searching for Kili's location while descending.

Due to its figure getting nearer, I figured out why it was so hard to pin down the sense of distance.

Its outline was unsteady without a specific size.

Despite being bird-shaped overall, Hraesvelgr did not have a fixed form. It was almost like it was enveloped in a layer of golden steam.

Flying in the night sky, Hraesvelgr looked very noble and sacred, almost making me forget it was a dragon, the enemy of mankind. The wind gradually grew stronger and started to carry glittering golden particles.

"Its movements are changing. Everyone, get ready!"

Perhaps certain that Kili was in Erlia Castle, the circling Hraesvelgr started to descend. The giant golden bird made a rapid descent straight towards our direction.

"To confirm whether the various attacks are effective, we will attack in waves. Lisa-san, please fire your first shot!"

"Understood—Pierce, flare!"

Gungnir's tip glowed brightly. The flash of positrons, magnified using Ren's dark matter, instantly reached Hraesvelgr's location.

"What...?"

Lisa exclaimed in shock.

Despite getting struck by positron blast, Hraesvelgr tore through the flash of light and continued to descend. Instead of slowing down, it sped up.

Seeing what happened, Mitsuki drew Brionac's bowstring.

"My turn! Terminating Arrow—Last Quark!"

Mitsuki shot an arrow of antimatter. This was Midgard's trump card.

Hraesvelgr made a beeline for us without choosing evasive action, taking Mitsuki's antimatter projectile head on.

The explosion—did not happen

Bouncing off the surface of Hraesvelgr's body, Mitsuki's arrow disappeared without trace.

"No way... Why—"

Mitsuki was at a loss but quickly came to her senses and turned to face me.

"Nii-san, please fire!"

"Understood!"

I nodded then gripped Tia's hand tightly.

Using the dark matter flowing from her I transmuted it into the ammunition's energy to fire Megiddo's boundary-incinerating blue flames.

"—Fire!!"

The projectile, a sphere of blue light, rose in the night sky. Aimed accurately, it struck Hraesvelgr right on the mark. The exploding light engulfed Hraesvelgr's body.

Due to the blinding light, the stars and the moon in the sky vanished.

—Whoosh!

The sound of wings flapping could be heard amidst the light.

Breaking through the blue sun in the night sky, the giant golden bird flew towards us.

Exactly like Lisa's attack, it did not work.

"Gah... I'm not done yet!"

Holding Tia's hand I left Megiddo, which was gradually melting from the heat of firing, then constructed another anti-dragon weapon.

I felt a sharp pain in my head and my consciousness grew hazy. Consecutive construction of anti-dragon armaments caused massive strain but I had no choice but to take the gamble.

"Marduk, main cannon—Babel!"

A giant barrel, split into two, gradually appeared. Tia closed her eyes and transmitted all her dark matter to me.

Hraesvelgr had descended to a height where details of its body could be seen clearly.

With golden feathers, Hraesvelgr's entire body was enveloped in dazzling particles of light. The reason why its size and outline fluctuated unsteadily seemed to be due to the particles' oscillation. The actual body was roughly ten meters or so. Compared to other dragons, Hraesvelgr seemed rather petite in size.

We were out of options if this failed.

"This must succeed—Fire!!"

The lens-shaped device inside the barrel glowed while pitch-black light extended towards Hraesvelgr.

This was a supergravitational spatial discontinuity which devoured and crushed all creation. Apart from neutralizing it with a repulsive field of antigravity like Leviathan's, there was no method to resist this attack.

At least, it should halt Hraesvelgr's movements.

However, the supergravity's beam of light stopped unnaturally just before making contact with Hraesvelgr.

As though the space occupied by Hraesvelgr rejected all interference, the supergravitational field could not reach it. Thus, only swallowing the night wind, it vanished.

This was not an issue of effectiveness. Instead, it was an issue on a completely different dimension.

Most likely, our attacks could not interfere with Hraesvelgr at all.

Understanding this was already too late. Descending with fierce speed, Hraesvelgr charged into Erlia Castle.

"—Pressure barrier, deploy!"

After Ariella's shout, I heard a giant noise and the ground shook intensely.

Dust flew up and the ancient and beautiful castle collapsed.

Debris of various sizes scattered, falling like rain.

"Yuu!"

Tia screamed and hugged me.

The flood of dust and flying debris was blocked entirely by Ariella's barrier of wind and did not reach us.

"—Thank you, we're saved."

I thanked Ariella but she was showing a grim expression while glaring at the place where Hraesvelgr had charged into. There was intense hostility that her eyes normally did not show.

Due to the cloud of dust in the surroundings, it was almost impossible to see anything, but there was no doubt that Hraesvelgr had charged into the vicinity of the hall.

"...Anyway, let us hurry to Kili-san! We fight while protecting her!"

Mitsuki issued orders and took flight, taking Iris with her. The door to the hall had already collapsed, so she probably intended to enter the castle from the place where Hraesvelgr had crashed through.

"Tia will fly with Yuu!"

Using dark matter, Tia created her fictional armament of red wings, then transmuted air to hover. Wrapped in her wind, I flew and pointed to the large hole appearing in the dust cloud.

"Enter from there!"

"Got it!"

Taking me with her, Tia rushed into the castle that was shrouded in dust. The rest followed us in.

Inside the great hall whose ceiling opened up to the third floor, screams and sounds of chaos could be heard.

Hraesvelgr's figure could be seen vaguely in the center of the hall which was filled with dust and golden particles. Perhaps because the golden particles covering its body had dispersed when it charged inside, Hraesvelgr seemed smaller than when it was landing earlier.

For some unknown reason, Hraesvelgr had stopped moving.

In such poor visibility conditions, I focused and looked, searching for Kili and Firill who was supposed to guard her.

Only after looking did I realize that the damage to the hall was unexpectedly small. Perhaps Firill had deployed a barrier to protect people from getting harmed by the debris.

"Yuu, over there!"

Kili discovered Kili and Firill faster than me. They were on the deep end of the hall—where King Albert's coffin was kept.

Firill was holding her book-shaped fictional armament. Just as I thought, she was the one suppressing damage to the hall.

"Over here, everyone!"

I called Mitsuki and the others then we all headed over to Firill.

We landed nearby and Kili smiled with resignation.

"From the way you look, the battle seems to be going badly."

"Yeah..."

I answered bitterly then looked at Firill.

"Are you okay, Firill?"

After hearing me, she seemed to relax her expression. Her shoulders also became less tense.

"I'm okay, it's good that you guys came back... I really wouldn't know what to do on my own..."

"After entering the castle, Hraesvelgr just stayed there without moving the whole time?"

The using her fictional armament's spear tip, Lisa pointed at the giant golden bird in the middle of the hall and asked Firill.

"...Yes, it turned its head to look this way and that, like searching for something, but didn't discover us yet, apparently."

"Could it be that it cannot find Kili-san due to the poor visibility...?"

Lisa murmured with a troubled expression but I could not agree.

From Hraesvelgr's behavior, I could sense hesitation that the previous dragons lacked.

Unlike Leviathan and Basilisk that had pursued in a straight line as soon as they picked their targets, Hraesvelgr circled many times in the air as though scouting before charging into the castle.

And right now, at the center of the hall, its gaze was wandering as though indecisively.

During this time, all the people in the hall had escaped outside.

We should escape too but the nearby entrances had collapsed and were blocked. Even if we could evacuate to somewhere else, the chances of escaping the winged Hraesvelgr were very low.

After the hall settled down, Hraesvelgr's gaze shifted towards us. Most of the smoke and dust had dispersed. With golden particles hanging around it, Hraesvelgr's figure was clear to see.

"Ugh..."

Kili frowned in pain and held her hand against the dragon mark. Bright light escaped from gaps between her fingers.

Hraesvelgr finally recognized Kili as its mate.

"We have no choice but to do everything we can to stop it. In any case, we must try all possible ways of attacking, to find a solution to this predicament!"

Under Mitsuki's orders, we readied our fictional armaments and stood in front of Kili.

Kaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!

Before we could attack, Hraesvelgr spread its wings with an acute cry. Golden particles were released from Hraesvelgr as the center, drifting towards us.

"Air Wall!"

Firill instantly deployed a barrier of wind but the particles engulfed us, ignoring the wall of air.

"Gah!?'

The instant the particles surrounded me, my body became unable to move. Despite a very clear consciousness, my body did not follow orders. That feeling was like having spirit sealed inside the body.

—What is this? What the heck is happening—

Surrounded by golden particles, all of us stopped moving. Since Kili was in my blindspot, I could not see her situation.

Damn it! Was there no solution?

The dark matter generated using my mind alone were destroyed by the particles as soon as they appeared.

Hraesvelgr approached us leisurely.

However, I was powerless, unable to lift even a finger.

"I thought perhaps you might be able to defeat Hraesvelgr—But in the end, it's still too hard."

I heard a voice of despair.

Kili went past my immobile body and walked over to in front of Hraesvelgr. Perhaps because we were acting as shields, she was the only one who was not covered by the particles.

Smiling sadly, Kili looked back and asked me:

"Or perhaps the reason 'to protect me' is not enough to make you go all-out?"

Since my mouth could not move, I was unable to answer.

But I was serious and I was prepared to fight to my last strength.

However, there was something in my power. I had not tested out all possibilities.

To avoid thinking of that option, I had placed it last. But by this point, I could not even choose that option—Because it was too late.

"Never mind, but I still want to express my gratitude to you. Thank you for protecting me. Also, I had a lot of fun today. This was probably the second time in my life to experience such a fun day."

Saying that, Kili turned to face the front and walked towards Hraesvelgr on her own.

"If this is destiny... then it can't be helped. Perhaps I should feel thankful that I could become a true dragon, being nothing at the moment."

Kili spoke in self-deprecation, halting her steps in front of Hraesvelgr.

Hraesvelgr stopped as well and looked at Kili below.

"Come—Do as you please."

She lifted her right arm with the glowing dragon mark, waiting for the moment to arrive.

Hraesvelgr slowly bent down, bringing its beak towards Kili's hand.

Stop!

I could not make a sound even though I wanted to yell.

But just as it was about to touch Kili's fingertips, Hraesvelgr stopped moving.

Clad in a coating of inviolable light, the dragon quietly stared at Kili's shining dragon mark then left her as though losing interest.

"Eh...?"

Kili's voice was hoarse.

Immediately, her dragon mark lost its brightness.

The change in color reverted?

Walking past the shocked Kili, Hraesvelgr approached our immobile group.

The giant golden bird looked at each of us in turn then settled its gaze on Firill.

What was it going to do—?

A bad premonition surged.

Its interest piqued by something, Hraesvelgr bent its body and approached Firill's face.

Then the golden particles filling this vicinity became even more concentrated.

But just as the particles covered King Albert's coffin, I witnessed an unbelievable scene.

Amidst the particles, a human silhouette appeared ambiguously.

Like a dot drawing, the tiny golden particles traced outlines.

I recalled what Ariella had said about Hraesvelgr possessing the ability to materialize souls. Reportedly, a scholar had also proposed that Hraesvelgr's ability was generating ether particles that caused souls to materialize.

Then the figure gradually taking form in front of King Albert's coffin, could it be—

The ambiguous golden human silhouette moved as though gliding, arriving in front of Hraesvelgr that was staring at Firill up close, then swung its arm that was made of particles.

—Thud!

Hraesvelgr's beak shook slightly while the the particles of the human silhouette's arm scattered from the reaction force.

That action was like the figure wanted to protect Firill.

Due to a higher concentration of particles near Hraesvelgr, the figure's face gradually became possible to discern.

In other words, these particles were ether particles... And that over there was King Albert's soul?

If that was the case, covered by golden particles, Hraesvelgr's body was also—

I was just about to discover Hraesvelgr's true form, but my thoughts were interrupted by acute cries.

—Kuehhhhhhhhhhh!

Hraesvelgr opened its beak towards the particles that seemed to be King Albert's soul.

Instantly, there was a strong gust of wind. The golden particles filling up the hall stirred, restrained by the wind, they were sucked into Hraesvelgr's mouth.

Even the particles making up King Albert were no exception.

Rustle—Like a sand castle collapsing, King Albert, manifested through particles, lost his outline.

The magical bird that devoured souls.

Just as in legends, Hraesvelgr devoured souls.

Before Firill's eyes, it devoured the soul of the gradually disintegrating King Albert.

But in this state where even using our voices was impossible, no one could stop things from happening.

Just before vanishing, King Albert seemed to turn his head towards Firill. However, even his expression could not be read—All of him vanished.

Perhaps satisfied from eating a soul or for some other reason, Hraesvelgr left Firill and turned its back to us.

Spreading its golden wings, Hraesvelgr took flight.

Then exiting the large hole it had opened in the wall, Hraesvelgr departed by flying through the sky.

Immediately, the golden particles filling the surroundings thinned out and my body became able to move again.

Inside the quiet castle, the sound of debris collapsing emptily could be heard.

"Really? I guess an imitation like me cannot become a dragon either."

Staring at the giant hole where Hraesvelgr had departed, Kili laughed dryly.

"Fufu... Ahahahaha! What a shame, mother, looks like I'm even more useless than you imagined!"

Then—Having regained her freedom, Firill collapsed on the floor and cried.

"...Sob... Sob... Ahhh... Ahhhhhhhhhhh!"

Kneeling at the spot where King Albert's soul had stood, she cried with sorrow.

None of us were able to say anything.

The crisis was over for now and we had avoided the worst-case scenario. However, the trauma left behind by Hraesvelgr was far too deep.

Part 3

Before long, the Principality's police gathered and the surroundings became slightly noisy.

Shinomiya-sensei and Prince Alfred explained what happened on our behalf. Exhausted from battle, we were driven back to the castle by Helen-san.

In the car, Firill was still crying nonstop. Lisa was hugging her against her chest, caressing her head gently.

Ariella was sitting in the opposite seat, staring at Firill with a pained expression. Kili was looking out the window blankly.

Feeling responsible, Mitsuki had her head down without saying a word. Iris, Tia and Ren were looking at everyone worriedly.

I found myself unable to think of any comforting words and could only listen to Firill sobbing.

After reaching the palace, Firill told Lisa "...I'm fine now, thank you" and went back to her own room.

"Impossible... How could she be fine?"

Lisa murmured with a regretful look, but perhaps she decided it would be best to let Firill have some quiet time to herself, Lisa did not chase after her.

"Then I'm returning to my room..."

Kili's room was located separately from ours. After saying that in a feeble voice, she left too.

"....."

Staring at Kili while she left, Mitsuki looked like she wanted to say something, but in the end, she entered her own room silently.

"Goodnight, Mononobe."

Iris smiled weakly at me and greeted me goodnight, then opened her room door.

"Yeah, 'night."

I said goodnight to her and returned to my room, laying myself on the bed directly.

Firill's sobbing and Kili's dry laughter kept circling in my mind.

—Not enough to make you go all-out?

Kili's words still lingered in my ear.

"Damn it..."

Tormented by regret and a bit of guilt, I fell asleep as though fainting.

—Knock knock.

Perhaps because my body was still in combat mode, even though I was exhausted, my consciousness rapidly awakened after I heard quiet knocking at the door.

I checked the time on my portable terminal. It was just after midnight. We had returned to the palace at 8pm, so that meant roughly four hours of sleep.

"...Who is it?"

I sat my heavy body up and projected my voice at the door. Despite lingering fatigue, at least the headache from transmutation was gone now.

"—It's me, Ariella. Can I... take a bit of your time?"

"Ariella? Sure... I'm opening the door now."

Despite feeling troubled by the unexpected visitor, I got off the bed and walked to the entrance. Since Midgard's dorms were usually unlocked, I actually forgot to lock my door last night and tonight.

"Good evening—Thanks for having me."

As soon as I opened the door, Ariella swiftly entered without waiting for my response.

"H-Hey."

"Mononobe-kun, come this way."

Ariella pulled my hand and took me to the window. Opening the window, one could reach the balcony outside and view the courtyard scenery.

"What the heck is going on?"

"Look over there."

Ignoring my troubled feelings, Ariella pointed outside the window.

I looked in the direction indicated and found a figure kneeling near the courtyard fountain.

"Is that... Firill?"

I looked closely to discover it was Firill in her formal dress.

"Yes, I was looking out the window by chance and saw—That's why I came to let you know."

"Let me know... Why me?"

"I want you to go over to her."

Hearing Ariella say that as though it were so easy, I frowned.

"In that case—Isn't Lisa a better choice than me?"

In the end, I had accomplished nothing. I could neither protect King Albert nor think of any words to comfort the crying Firill. All I did was watch.

"Firill was putting on a brave face in front of Lisa when we returned to the palace. To her, Lisa is probably her best friend but not someone to seek help and rely on."

"Even if that's true, why me—"

"Intuition, I guess. After seeing what happened in this country, I feel that you're the best choice."

Ariella replied with a cheerful smile. However, I could sense from her expression that she seemed to be forcing herself.

"Did you think of going yourself?"

"If I go, we'll just be licking each other's wounds. Even though I can empathize, I can't shoulder her pain and sorrow."

Ariella answered bitterly, looking at me with eyes glinting from tears.

"—Me too, my loved ones' souls were eaten by Hraesvelgr."

"What..."

"I mentioned a bit to you during the daytime. I grew up in an unstable Middle Eastern country. Many people died whenever large-scale conflicts occurred. And every time, Hraesvelgr would arrive to gorge itself on souls to its heart's content."

Looking up at the night sky through the window, Ariella continued:

"Although some call it a messenger to transport souls to heaven, I think it's simply feeding, that's all."

Ariella touched the window frame and moved her fingers along it. In a voice of suppressed emotions, she said:

"But Hraesvelgr doesn't kill people directly. My loved ones lost their lives because they got caught in a terrorist attack. But even so... I still can't forgive Hraesvelgr for taking their souls away in the end."

Saying that, Ariella scratched the window glass with her nails, looking like she was about to burst into tears, she stared at Firill who was kneeling in the courtyard.

"Because if we're forced to confront the fact that the souls are no longer, what exactly are we supposed to pray to? It's extremely despairing to know that talking to the dead is meaningless."

"Ariella..."

"That's why you should go to Firill. Words that cannot be conveyed to the dead can only be confided to the living."

Ariella smiled sorrowfully then took my hand and led me out of the room.

"Then I'm counting on you, Mononobe-kun."

Ariella gave my shoulder a pat then was about to return to her room.

"Ariella, are you okay?"

But I was worried about her too, so I asked her from behind just as she was leaving.

"Oh. Yeah, don't worry about me. Because it happened long ago. It's way in the past. To me, the hardship after that was much worse."

"After that?"

"Basically the time after losing everyone I could rely on, but before coming to Midgard. I'll be very happy if you care about me and you're willing to listen to my story when we have time in the future."

Ariella showed a bit of vulnerability in her eyes while she spoke.

"Yes, I promise you."

"—Thank you, Mononobe-kun, you're so nice."

Ariella blushed happily and thanked me. Her expression moved me.

The path she had trodden in life so far seemed full of hardship I could not imagine.

If only I could help her somehow...

With such thoughts, I made my way to Firill.

Walking down the stairs, I found a door leading to the courtyard and opened it.

Instantly, cold wind of the night blew, forcing me to shiver. Staying here for extended periods would catch a cold.

Anyway, I went for the fountain in order to bring Firill back indoors.

The center of the fountain was decorated with a bronze statue of a girl playing with birds. Perhaps because it was late at night, the fountain's water was not flowing.

I saw Firill kneeling next to the fountain, her shoulders trembling.

Since she did not react even when my footsteps approached, I took off my suit jacket, the one I had worn at the banquet, and draped it over Firill's shoulders.

"It's very cold here, let's go inside."

"...Mononobe-kun?"

Firill looked up to stare at me with eyes red from crying.

"I know you are very sad, but you're going to catch a cold at this rate."

I placed my hand on her shoulder and spoke but she shook her head.

"I don't care."

"Firill..."

Just as I hesitated, wondering what I should do, Firill asked me quietly.

"This fountain's statue, what does it look like to you?"

"Huh? It looks like a girl playing with birds..."

Despite feeling perplexed, I answered with what I saw.

"Let me tell you... This is me. Apparently after I went to Midgard, Grandfather ordered it made. Fufu, not much of a resemblance, right?"

Firill spoke in a hoarse voice and smiled stiffly.

"No—now that you mention it, there is a resemblance. Although it's much younger than your current look, I can still tell vaguely."

"Really? I still think it looks like someone else. However, what I'm curious about is... Is this how I look in Grandfather's eyes?"

Firill silently stared at the image of herself in her grandfather's eyes.

"But... There's no way to confirm now. Whether questions, farewells or thanks—Nothing is possible now. Until the very end, I did nothing more than enjoy Grandfather's protection."

With intense chagrin in her voice, Firill lowered her head again.

"Being protected isn't a bad thing, right?"

Saying that, I put more force in my hand on her shoulder.

"Huh...?"

"I'm sure in deciding to protect his granddaughter, he didn't need any reasons or calculations. He protected just because he wanted to protect. Until the very end, even as a soul, he still acted according to these feelings. Were I in his shoes, I'd definitely have no regrets."

Firill glanced sideways at my face then exhaled lightly. The white breath scattered in the wind.

"I think putting it that way... has nothing to do with my wish."

"Yeah, you're right if you take the extreme view. But so-called protection, in a certain sense, is a one-sided action to begin with. It's there regardless of the receiver's wishes."

"That's way too sad, never considering... the feelings of the one who is protected."

"Maybe, but there are people who only know how to protect in that way."

While saying this, I felt a stabbing pain in the depths of my heart.

I was probably like that. To protect Mitsuki and Iris, I had paid a terrible price.

That was self-satisfaction *without caring about the other side*. The result of that was I had deceived Mitsuki and hurt Iris.

"Mononobe-kun, you're terrible. If Grandfather is satisfied... Then my crying becomes selfish crying only for myself, leaving me no choice but to stop crying."

"No, crying for yourself is nothing bad. It's just that—You should do it somewhere warmer."

In as gentle a tone as possible, I urged her to go indoors.

"...Got it, then I'll cry somewhere slightly warmer."

Firill nodded but she hugged me directly.

"What!? F-Firill?"

"If it's in your embrace, Mononobe-kun, with this kind of warmth... I guess I'm allowed to cry?"

Firill had her arms wrapped around my waist, her forehead against my chest.

Things happened too suddenly, surprising me. The sensation of a soft bulge shook my mind. But the sight of her trembling shoulders restored calmness in my heart.

"—Yeah."

I gave her an affirmative answer and placed my hand on her head.

While I was combing her sleek hair with my fingers, she wept silently.

Earlier, when the principal was stroking my head, I felt embarrassment and pleasure—The feelings back then were like I was being acknowledged, being accepted.

Hence, I wanted to reassure Firill too, so I gently stroked her head continuously.

My shoulders felt cold because I had lent my jacket to Firill but due to hugging her, my front side was very warm.

Feeling the night wind against me like this, I listened to her quiet sobs.

After a while, the sobbing stopped. Rubbing her eyes, Firill looked up.

"Mononobe-kun... The tip of your nose is red."

"Yeah, because it's quite chilly. On the other hand, your eyes are very red."

"Then that makes us a pair, right?"

"I guess."

"Fufu—"

Firill smiled and separated from me.

"Thank you, I've calmed down a bit. It'd be bad if you caught a cold, Mononobe-kun, so let's return."

Firill held my hand with her cold fingers and walked towards the palace.

However—

"...!"

She suddenly made a pained expression and held her hand against the vicinity of her left shoulder.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know, it suddenly feels scorching—"

Firill pulled her dress away from her shoulder to check out the location of the symptom. I panicked at the faint glimpse of her chest but I stopped shifting my gaze away when I heard her go "eh..."

Firill's dragon mark was on her left shoulder. Its edges had turned slightly yellow.

"Don't tell me..."

Unable to believe the sight before my eyes, I groaned hoarsely.

Just at that moment, a sinister voice arrived, carried by the night wind.

"I guessed this would happen."

Kili emerged from the shadows under neatly trimmed trees.

"How long have you been there..."

"I just arrived. I saw you two flirting from the window. Curious, I came over to have a look."

"We weren't flirting."

"Now isn't the time to get hung up on that part, right? I believe the color change of her dragon mark is the most important right now."

I knew without needing her to point that out, but I just needed a bit of time to calm down.

"This phenomenon means that Firill has caught the dragon's eye?"

Looking at the partial color change of Firill's dragon mark, I asked Kili.

"Yes, that's exactly it. And since it's the same color as mine, Hraesvelgr is the one targeting her. Hraesvelgr probably found its suitable mate, the real one, not an imitation like me, and it happened earlier at that place."

Kili answered with a heavy tone of self-deprecation.

"What do mean by an imitation, Kili? Weren't you targeted by Hraesvelgr too?"

"My dragon mark was forcibly modified to match Hraesvelgr's wavelength."

"Modified? Don't tell me—"

That was something possible only for Kili's creator, Vritra. But I could not bring that up in front of Firill, so I stopped mid-sentence.

"Yes, it's basically what you imagine. Hence, I'm an imitation, in all sorts of ways."

Kili spoke mockingly.

"Kili..."

"Don't look at me with those eyes. The one you should pity currently should be her, whom Hraesvelgr has chosen as a mate, right?"

Kili keenly noticed the shred of pity in my heart and pointed impatiently at Firill.

"Mate... huh? Then Hraesvelgr will still—"

"Once her dragon mark changes color completely, it should come again. In Tia's case, the dragon mark took around ten hours to change color completely. Then after that, Basilisk began to move. I'm guessing that she cannot be made a mate unless the dragon mark finishes changing in color."

"Ten hours..."

The color change was already in progress so the time limit might be even shorter.

If it started from the encounter earlier, there was only six hours or so remaining in the worst case.

Hraesvelgr flew away despite getting interested in Firill, probably because the preparations for Firill to become its mate had not finished.

Speaking of which, it was the same for Iris too. Between her initial report of symptoms and when Leviathan started to invade, there was a time gap.

"I've been chosen by Hraesvelgr—"

Firill was staring at her dragon mark in shock.

"Okay, what will you do? Have a rematch against an opponent that you lost helplessly against? Or..."

Kili stared coldly at me.

"...Anyway, I have to report this to Shinomiya-sensei and Mitsuki first. Then we'll talk about what's next."

Without thinking about the worst option, I accompanied the two of them back into the palace.

We first went to find Shinomiya-sensei but it looked like she was not back yet, so I knocked on Mitsuki's door.

"—Coming. Eh? Nii-san? With Firill-san and Kili-san? It seems like something happened?"

Seeing our unusual vibes, Mitsuki showed a solemn expression and invited us into her room. She was probably in the middle of work. I could see various documents in progress on her tablet's screen on a table in the room.

Mitsuki was dressed in her usual uniform. I guess wearing these clothes probably felt more calming.

"Firill's dragon mark has changed color."

After this opening line, I explained the current situation including what I had heard from Kili.

Firill returned my jacket and showed Mitsuki her dragon mark whose edges had started to change color.

"...I see now. That explains why—"

Mitsuki spoke with a grim expression.

"Explains what?"

"Shinomiya-sensei informed me that Hraesvelgr was still flying in the Principality's outskirts. Due to that, air traffic has been blocked off completely."

"In other words, escaping is impossible right from the start... And reinforcements cannot come either."

In any case, I did not think Midgard or NIFL could make it in time even if they started mobilizing now.

"Right, so we have to handle it here."

Mitsuki answered gravely but Kili spoke up in response.

"Clearly nothing works no matter what you do. May I ask how exactly do you intend to handle it?"

"Indeed, our attacks cannot even harm Hraesvelgr, but that battle was not completely fruitless for us. I happen to be in the middle of organizing the report and I have also added my own analysis to the content."

Mitsuki moved over to the tablet at the table then continued:

"There are two noteworthy phenomena. My antimatter projectile did not react with Hraesvelgr at all... And the fact that what appeared to be the manifestation of King Albert's soul was able to touch Hraesvelgr."

Mitsuki raised two fingers and displayed a photo of Hraesvelgr on the screen. Since this was inside the castle hall, it was probably taken by Shinomiya-sensei.

I thought back and agreed. Shielding Firill behind him, King Albert had interfered with Hraesvelgr. Before that, all our attacks were futile no matter how powerful, yet he succeeded in smacking away Hraesvelgr's beak, attracting its attention and stopping the monster's attack.

"Antimatter did not cause an annihilation reaction, which means that... The composition of Hraesvelgr's body is something that cannot be defined as matter. And the so-called soul is precisely a concept that does not exist in physical laws. While searching for a hypothesis capable of explaining these phenomena, I found one that matched."

Saying that, Mitsuki switched the information shown on the screen.

It was a paper titled "Unidentified Mediating Particle for Causing the Manifestation of Souls" with the author's name being... Miyazawa Kenya.

"According to this hypothesis, Hraesvelgr's ability is to produce mediating particles to manifest the spirit—defined as 'ether wind.' Since spirit bodies, which use mediating particles to obtain tangible form, do not follow the rules of this world, all kinds of interference will not work."

Mitsuki turned the pages and continued to explain. It sounded like the same hypothesis as the one I heard from Ariella.

"It looks like Hraesvelgr, whose appearance is a golden bird, is the manifestation of a spirit body. That is why our attacks do not work yet King Albert is able to touch it, seeing as both are spirit bodies."

At this point, Mitsuki turned her gaze away from the screen and looked at her hands.

"Back when we were engulfed by golden particles, the reason why we were unable to move was probably because we possess material bodies."

"What do you mean?"

Unable to link those phenomena together, I tilted my head in puzzlement.

"Because our spirit is inside the flesh, one could speculate that even if the spirit manifests, it is still in a state sealed inside the body."

"In other words... There's no way to interfere with Hraesvelgr unless the spirit leaves the body to become a purely spiritual existence?"

"Indeed, according to this theory. However, you can also say that we are protected by our bodies. If we fought as spirits, we would surely have ended up like King Albert—"

Perhaps in consideration of Firill, Mitsuki stopped mid-sentence.

Indeed, a human with only a soul would just be food for Hraesvelgr. Predator and prey—the gap was too large between them.

"What is this? So the result is still no solution."

Kili sighed in exasperation.

"Well... Indeed, there is no concrete plan at the moment. But as long as there is a hypothesis, it should be possible to take countermeasures."

Mitsuki glared at Kili and retorted.

But at this moment, Firill, who had been silent all along, spoke up.

"That hypothesis—Ariella mentioned... It was not recognized because there's no way to apply it."

"F-Firill-san... But—"

Mitsuki was at a loss for words but still wanted to argue. However, Firill cut her off.

"I am prepared."

Clenching her fist, despite trembling shoulders, she was about to voice the worst option.

"If there's no solution, I'll—"

"Hold on!"

I yelled acutely and grabbed Firill's shoulders.

"At least I still have a method I haven't tried yet and Mitsuki might come up with an effective battle plan next, so don't jump to conclusions so hastily."

I persuade her in a strong tone of voice. Firill answered with trembling lips.

"This verbal reassurance—"

"It's not verbal reassurance. I'm speaking the truth. There are other possibilities, so I won't give up."

After declaring that clearly, I turned to face Mitsuki.

"This is similar to the Leviathan situation. The same goes for you, Mitsuki, don't give up until the very end. Even if you can't think of a single plan, I'll still find a solution."

"Nii-san..."

Mitsuki's eyes wavered, showing uneasiness.

Meanwhile, Kili watched us as though she had something to say.

Part 4

Since the plans had to be made depending on the dragon mark's color change, Mitsuki kept Firill in her room and ordered us to rest until further instructions.

In order for everyone else to fight at full strength when Hraesvelgr attacked, Mitsuki looked like she did not intend to wake them up until battle plans were decided.

Kili and I went to the corridor. I started walking back to my room and Kili followed me.

"—Since you still have an ace up your sleeve, why didn't you use it when I was in a crisis?"

I heard Kili's voice by my ear when I stopped in front of my room.

The bitter sense of guilt in my heart was awakened once more.

"To me, it's a last resort that I'd avoid as much as possible. But I was immobilized before I realized there was no other way... Even if I wanted to use it, I couldn't."

I felt like I was looking for excuses, answering while avoiding eye contact with Kili.

"I see, and what's the reason for avoiding it?"

"Because I'll probably *become even less like myself than now*."

"....."

Hearing my brief answer, Kili fell silent.

"Sorry, I'm not trying to deceive you. It's just that I can't give any details."

"...Very well, I believe you. It's just that if that's the case—You don't have to force yourself, right?"

"Huh?"

Kili's suggestion was unexpected.

"I'm not saying this just because it no longer matters to me. If your final resort is of that nature, then it's only natural you won't use it to protect me, because what everyone should protect most is themselves."

"Well..."

"You people seem to think that the only two options are to either defeat Hraesvelgr or kill the girl, but I believe there is also the path of living as a dragon. At least, I don't think it's a bad option."

"Unlike you, rather than become a dragon, we—"

"You prefer to die? Really? Is there anything in this world more tragic than dying?"

Kili's words stabbed me in the chest.

"...Perhaps not, but we're the ones to decide what's important to us."

"I suppose that's a kind of truth too. Sorry for saying something malicious. I guess I'm still a bit miffed. That 'I'll still find a solution' from you—If possible, I really wished I'd heard it from you during my crisis."

Kili smiled wryly then her tone turned gentle.

"Move forward in the manner of your liking. Because no matter what path you take, no matter what you lose... In the end, I believe you'll surely turn into the existence I hope for."

Kili smiled seductively then left, leaving what sounded like a riddle to me.

"What are you expecting from my existence?"

Watching her as she left, I muttered quietly to myself.

If she was using us to protect her from Hraesvelgr's attack, then there was no point for her to stay here anymore. Or was this her intention, to go to Midgard despite knowing her freedom would be taken away?

Her true intentions were unreadable. I pondered while waiting for her to disappear from the far end of the corridor. Then instead of returning to my room, I went to Iris' room next door.

If the battle against Hraesvelgr required using the last resort, then there were things I must first tell Iris and no one else.

"Iris."

I knocked while calling her name but no one answered. Left without a choice, I tried opening the door but it was locked from inside. She was probably sleeping soundly from exhaustion.

But if I made too much noise, others would notice.

I thought for a while then went back to my room in the end.

Without turning on the light, I went straight to the large window on the far end and entered the balcony from there.

Standing on the balcony's edge, I confirmed the distance to the adjacent balcony. As expected, it was not far. Just as we tested out yesterday, the gap was small enough for our fingertips to touch by stretching our hands out.

Hence, I backed away, took a running start then stepped on the balcony's railing.

I jumped to the adjacent balcony without any difficulty. Checking that the window was not locked, I entered the room. Even if I called to her from outside, Iris was probably not going to wake up.

A dim lightbulb was lit in the room. Iris was sound asleep in her bed.

I approached and peered at her face. She seemed to be having a good dream. Her face looked especially relaxed. Placed on the sideboard next to the bed was the hairpin I had given her.

"Mmmm... Fufu..."

I felt bad about waking her up because she really looked like she was enjoying her sleep. But time was limited, so I resolved myself and shook Iris by the shoulder.

"Iris, please wake up. Iris—"

"Huah...?"

Iris opened her eyes slightly and made a sleepy noise.

"Sorry for forcing you to wake up."

Gazing into her eyes, I apologized to her.

"...Mononobe? Eh? W-Why... Isn't this my room? No way, is this a... n-night visit?"

Iris frantically looked around the room, her face going bright red.

"Wawa, what should I do? I-I'm not ready yet—"

Seeing Iris' reaction, I could not help but feel my heart race. But of course, I was not here for a night visit.

"N-No, that's not it. Calm down, will you?"

"Oh—Right, I promised... The kiss, right? A-Are you that impatient?"

Iris spoke with a look of realization but that guess was wrong too. However, Iris was watching me with endearing eyes and blushing cheeks. Mesmerized by her appearance, I could not answer immediately.

"Sorry for making you wait, Mononobe. Come—you can kiss me now."

Sitting up in bed, Iris closed her eyes and pointed her lips upward.

I gulped and almost subconsciously drew near Iris' face, then I suddenly came to my senses.

"N-No, like I said, that's not it. I came here to tell you something important, Iris."

I spoke in a serious voice. Iris opened her eyes with a dumbfounded expression.

"Something important?"

"Yeah, actually—"

I told her about Firill's dragon mark changing color and how Mitsuki was racking her brain for a plan. Iris' face, originally red, instantly turned pale.

"No way... Firill-chan—"

"Hraesvelgr will surely come when the dragon mark finishes changing in color. Mitsuki is definitely trying hard, but I think it's very difficult to come with countermeasures before time's up."

"T-Then what do we do? Will it turn out like with me last time? I don't want to see you and Mitsuki-chan fight again."

"Don't worry, I told her I still have a solution. As long as there are other ways, Mitsuki won't choose the worst option."

In response to my answer, Iris showed uneasiness on her face.

"Mononobe... What are you planning to do?"

Iris asked me in a trembling voice. Most likely, she already had some idea.

Because there was no other option under these circumstances.

"I'll borrow Yggdrasil's power one more time."

"N-No! If you do that, Mononobe, you'll again—"

Iris grabbed my arm in extreme panic.

"I know, but that's the only thing left that I can do. I don't want to give up on Firill."

"I-I feel the same way about this... But even if you go that far, there's no guarantee you'll defeat Hraesvelgr."

However, I shook my head. Yggdrasil's words, from when we contracted, flashed through my mind.

'Offer is, power. Demand is, extermination.'

Then when I asked the extermination of what, Yggdrasil's answer was:

—All dragon species, apart from myself.

"Yggdrasil asked me to exterminate all other dragons. Then it's very likely that the data it intended to send to my brain contains a weapon that works on Hraesvelgr."

The knowledge of power that Yggdrasil transmitted to me—data on weapons from a lost civilization—was too vast in volume. I halted the transmission halfway. The materialization of the anti-dragon armament Marduk was also in a pitiful state with incomplete equipment. Hence, if I downloaded again to supplement Marduk's data, I might be able to find a breakthrough.

"But, but..."

Iris' eyes were overflowing with tears.

"H-Hey—"

Seeing her tears fall like rain, I could not help but get flustered.

"You're clearly in pain from forgetting memories shared with Mitsuki-chan, but now... You can't forget more. Mononobe, what you clearly need to do is remember... not forget..."

She was crying purely for my sake.

The fact that I might break her heart if I lose my memories was only secondary to her—

"...!"

Unable to watch Iris' crying face any longer, I hugged her tightly. Smelling Iris' sweet scent, my heart raced. Through the flimsy pajamas, I could feel her warmth. Strong feelings of love surged from my heart.

"Mononobe...?"

"—Sorry."

I stroked her head and apologized to her.

For telling her about my memories, adding to her burden; for making her feel apologetic to Mitsuki; for being unable to respond to her feelings directly; for being unable to stop, despite her worrying so much about me—

I entrusted all of my feelings of apology to this one word.

"Mononobe, you've already decided, right?"

Iris asked while crying.

"Yeah."

"You'll... forget many things, and won't be the same Mononobe, right?"

"Probably—That will happen."

I had no way of predicting what I was going to lose this time. Perhaps like earlier, I might not even notice what I had forgotten.

However—I won't be my current self, that was for sure.

"Then..... Tell me."

Iris clutched my clothing tightly and barely managed to squeeze out a hoarse voice.

"Huh?"

I felt my clothing gradually getting wet from tears.

"Tell me the precious memories you don't want to forget, Mononobe. Then it's fine if you forget, because I will remember them carefully!"

Iris looked up with tears flowing, crying out while her slender shoulders shook. Her firm gaze stared into my eyes, expressing her determination.

"You'll remember them, Iris?"

I felt my heart pound hard. The long suppressed feelings in the bottom of my heart were shaken.

"Yes, I... absolutely won't forget the current Mononobe."

Iris' words moved my heart strongly.

"I also won't forget what you don't want to forget."

I felt fiery emotions surge in my heart. Her words made me both happy and incredibly conflicted. My heart struggled nonstop.

"Because—Those are the memories of the one I love!"

My heart felt like it was about to stop. My chest was hurting badly. Feelings of love were overflowing. I hugged Iris even more tightly.

"......Thank you, Iris."

Apart from that, I could not find any other words to reply.

"Yeah—So, can you tell them to me?"

Iris stroked my back gently and asked me.

"Okay."

Then as much as time permitted, I recounted my memories to Iris.

Sitting side by side with her on the bed's edge, I conveyed to her the precious memories I did not want to forget.

There was no need to mention in particular what had happened after arriving in Midgard. As for the NIFL days, there were no memories I wanted to keep. Hence, what I told her was necessarily things from three years ago or earlier.

But within that range, what I definitely remembered were all things related to Mitsuki. No, more precisely, they were memories with Mitsuki after we became family.

For example, what games we played together, what places we often went to play, trivial reasons leading to arguments—I recounted all of these insignificant yet incomparably precious memories that I could remember.

Even I felt surprised that I could still remember such things.

There was a summer festival that we went together every year. One year, we won a cat plushie from shooting a target. Another year, we scooped up lots of goldfish and had to buy an aquarium.

Showing off the presents by our pillows during Christmas. Putting our New Year's money from our parents together and discussing seriously what game to buy. Sometimes, we had arguments.

I still remember these things. I still had this many—memories that I had not lost yet.

The more I talked, the happier I got. The memories kept pouring out.

Scolded by parents, I got Mitsuki caught up and we ran away from home together. Wanting to see a meteor shower, I sneaked out in the middle of the night and forced Mitsuki to come along.

There was far more than I could possibly talk about.

Iris only nodded from time to time then listened silently.

But compared to the memories that had accumulated for so long, there was too little time remaining.

Before I could finish, our time was up.

"—Iris-san, please get up."

There was knocking at the door. Mitsuki's voice came from the other side.

Most likely, the color change in Firill's dragon mark was nearing completion. Mitsuki was going to tell everyone the situation.

"Then I'll get back to my room through the balcony."

Although I had more memories to tell, I still got up from the bed.

"...Okay, I've remembered all of it. Mononobe, don't worry."

Iris smiled gently and nodded.

"Great, that reassures me a lot. Thank you."

After thanking her, I walked to the balcony.

But just before I opened the window, Iris grabbed my right hand from behind.

"Wait—One last thing."

"Huh?"

I turned my head back, only to find a gentle sensation pressed on my lips. Iris' face was right before my eyes.

What made contact was—Iris' lips.

Although things happened suddenly, the emotions surging in my heart as a result were neither surprise nor confusion. Instead, they were intense love and feelings of warmth and tranquility.

After a kiss that lasted much longer than last time, Iris blushed and smiled with melancholy.

"...I'll be very happy if you could remember this kiss, Mononobe."

Only then did Iris finally speak her wish.

It was just a tiny willful request.

"I promise you—No matter what happens, this kiss is the one thing I absolutely won't forget."

Thus I vowed for the sake of the girl I loved.

I engraved my vow deeply into my heart.

Part 5

After Shinomiya-sensei returned to the palace, Mitsuki summoned all of us including Kili to gather inside Shinomiya-sensei's room. In a stiff tone of voice, she reported the current situation.

Firill's dragon mark had turned 80% yellow. Based on the current rate so far, there were roughly two hours until the color change finished.

Then Mitsuki apologized to us for failing to come up with a battle plan.

"—My humble apologies. Although I tried to contact the one who proposed the 'ether wind' hypothesis, but my efforts were futile."

Saying that, Mitsuki glanced in Ren's direction.

Speaking of which, it was someone named "Miyazawa Kenya" who had proposed that hypothesis. Miyazawa was the same as Ren's family name. Was this person related to her?

But Mitsuki continued to explain without bringing this up at all. Judging from Mitsuki's expression, I could tell that she was slightly worried about Ren. This was apparently a matter that must not be broached lightly, so I cautiously avoided saying something unnecessary.

"At the current stage, I cannot propose an effective plan against Hraesvelgr, however..."

Mitsuki looked at me as though seeking help.

I know—I nodded in response to her then walked in front of everyone.

"I still have a trump card I didn't use, so I'd like everyone to not give up. The chances of saving Firill is not zero yet."

"A trump card? What exactly is it?"

Lisa asked a most natural question, but I could not answer her.

I still had not connected to Yggdrasil yet. Since the download of data would strain the mind so much that memories and emotions would be overwritten, even if I could barely hang on to consciousness after the connection, I might

faint afterwards. Hence, despite the risk of not knowing the contents of the data in advance, my only choice was still to perform the download just before the battle.

"Sorry, at this point in time—I can't say."

"What... Are you joking here?"

"I'm serious. I'm not joking, so please believe me. I will definitely find a breakthrough—Just like the time when I saved Iris."

Hearing what I said, Lisa gasped.

"Please, everyone..."

I bowed my head and pleaded to the group. For a moment, the room became silent.

It was probably possible to increase credibility slightly by mentioning the contract with Yggdrasil, but I could not mention that in front of Mitsuki.

There was also the fact that Shinomiya-sensei was present. If it came to light that I made a deal with a dragon, I could not predict what Shinomiya-sensei would decide as Midgard's commander. In the worst case, I might be arrested.

In order to fight Hraesvelgr, I could not afford to have my actions restricted. Hence, the only thing I could do now was ask for everyone to believe in me.

Finally, someone sighed.

"...Sigh, no helping it. Since you mentioned that, I cannot refute you. Were it not for your power, we would have failed to defeat Leviathan. That is the truth, after all. Even if there is no proof, I will believe in your past achievements."

I looked up to see Lisa show a helpless expression.

No one raised any objections.

"Well then—The second battle against Hraesvelgr will proceed, centered around Nii-san. Nii-san, please issue orders regarding the details of your plan."

Compared to Iris who knew the whole story, Mitsuki was showing an inexplicably worried expression. However, she still spoke as the captain of the Counter-Dragon Squad.

Perhaps Mitsuki already felt some kind of premonition.

Although I had warned myself all along not to let her notice, every time I fought with my memories as the price, surely something must have changed.

"First of all, I'd like to take the battle to a place where we can minimize damage to the surroundings. Is there somewhere suitable?"

"...I believe the area near the waterfall should be the most suited to that. There are no civilian homes near there. Since dawn has not arrived yet, there should be no people there."

Firill raised her hand slightly and offered her opinion. Unlike when she first discovered the color change in her dragon mark, she looked quite calm on the surface.

Mitsuki nodded in agreement.

"Then the waterfall area will be chosen as the interception site. Shinomiya-sensei, may I trouble you with the procedures of sealing off the battle zone?"

"Understood, leave it to me."

Shinomiya-sensei nodded and accepted Mitsuki's request, then immediately started to make calls.

Watching this scene, I told everyone something else they must pay attention to.

"Also, NIFL's movements are also concerning. If they make a move on Firill during the battle, then all will be lost. Since there is still time before the dragon mark changes color completely, I'd like to deal with them now."

"I do not think we need to worry about that. Apart from us and Kili-san, no one should know about Firill-san's situation. Considering the possibility of eavesdropping, even Shinomiya-sensei was informed just now right here."

Mitsuki thought I was worrying too much but I shook my head.

"No... Sleipnir is currently under orders to monitor Kili. When Firill showed me her dragon mark that had started changing in color, Kili, who's under surveillance, was also present. Even if we were in the heart of the palace's premises, it was still outdoors. It's very likely that NIFL saw us."

Hearing what I had said, Kili also responded "Yeah, they are definitely not opponents to be underestimated."

"Then what should be done?"

Mitsuki asked me with a stiff face.

"Before we begin the operation, I'll eliminate the threat from NIFL."

I answered concisely then turned to face Firil..

"Because of that, Firill, will you go on a date with me right now?"

"Huh...?"

She was dumbstruck by this sudden invitation.

On further thought, this was perhaps the first time in my life that I asked a girl out on a date.

Chapter 4 - Noah of Soul Destruction

Part 1

Firill and I, the two of us, were walking in town before dawn.

Although the air was very chilly, it was not a problem as we were fully prepared for the cold. Firill was dressed in a very warm looking coat with a hat made of insulating materials. Prioritizing mobility, I was wearing a thick jacket with a scarf.

Our destination was a plaza that overlooked the entire waterfall—The location of the final showdown against Hraesvelgr.

We were walking to the waterfall from the palace on foot.

"...Will they attack?"

Firill exhaled white breath, lowering her voice to ask me.

"If they know about the dragon mark changing color... They'll definitely come. Because they also want to settle things before Hraesvelgr's arrival."

I inserted my hands into my pockets and answered while looking up at the cloudy sky. Judging from the cloud cover in the sky, it looked like it might snow soon.

"If nothing happens... This would just be an ordinary date, right?"

"If that's the case, it'd still be nice."

"...Yeah, I guess."

Firill chuckled lightly and nodded in agreement.

"Mononobe-kun."

"Yes?"

"If it's a date... Let's hold hands."

Firill drew out her hand from her coat pocket and said that to me.

"Eh? N-No, umm..."

I frantically looked around.

Since Kili herself was also NIFL's target, we left Kili in the palace, but the others were watching us from afar. I asked them to protect Firill from a distance in case a battle broke out and not to worry about covering me.

Iris was among them of course, hence I could not help but worry about her gaze.

"You refuse?"

Seeing emotions of uneasiness wavering in Firill's eyes, I had no choice but to give up resisting. I exhaled.

"It's not that I refuse, but... Your hand will get cold."

"Then let's do this."

Firill reached into my pocket and entwined her fingers with mine.

"H-Hey."

"...Now this is very warm."

Blushing slightly, she smiled.

"Urgh..."

Feeling very embarrassed, I looked away.

The mountain range in the east was began to whiten while starlight was gradually fading.

"This is my first date with a boy."

"That's because you're a princess."

"Yes... Since you invited me, a princess, out on a date, Mononobe-kun... Do you have the resolve to become a prince?"

Firill cocked her head and smiled mischievously while she asked me.

"What—A-A prince?"

Speaking of which, I recalled her saying something similar last time. On that occasion, she had said: "Do not fall for me unless you have the resolve to be a prince."

"You don't?"

Firill gripped my hand harder in my pocket and leaned herself over. her soft bosom made contact with my arm.

"F-Firill..."

Not knowing which part of what she said was serious, I felt rather troubled.

"Perhaps this might be the last chance. Even if it's just for now, if you'll be my prince... I'll be very glad."

Firill rested her head against my shoulder and spoke in a trembling voice.

Hearing her say that, I noticed she was simply feeling afraid.

"It's not the last. I will absolutely find a solution, so don't go talking like a defeatist."

I gripped her hand in return and declared forcefully.

"Yeah... You're right, I'm sorry. After hearing your encouragement, Mononobe-kun, I feel like things will really be fine, but..."

Firill made a gloomy expression and gazed at me quietly.

"Right now, Mononobe-kun, you're making the same expression as Grandfather."

"Same expression?"

"The expression of deciding to protect. It's also an expression that makes others believe they're being protected. However, it's also very *one-sided* in feeling. That's the kind of expression it is."

Firill's gaze did not leave my face while she spoke.

"....."

Realizing my thoughts had been read, I looked away, silent.

"For my sake, Mononobe-kun, are you planning to do something?"

"—Nothing much, I'm just doing what I can."

"Really? I guess I've failed to convey my message to you, just like with Grandfather."

Firill spoke sorrowfully. White breath dispersed in the wind.

"....."

I responded with silence again, because I had no idea what to say.

"It's okay, I understand. Right now, I'll let you protect me one-sidedly, but if I survive today as a human... I will take revenge."

"Huh?"

I was surprised by this unexpected statement. I looked back at Firill, only to see her determined gaze staring straight at me.

"I will take one-sided revenge on you... Prepare yourself."

Firill smiled in a domineering manner.

Although cold sweat slid down my cheek, I decided it was a good thing that she was still able to consider the future.

Even though for me, it was going to be a day of hardship.

Prick.

I suddenly felt goosebumps form on my neck.

Like being pricked by a pin, I sensed sharp and subtle killing intent.

I instantly switched my consciousness to awaken the monster of my subconscious, deep in my heart, as a substitute. I awakened the "Fafnir" sleeping inside me.

The line of killing intent was not directed towards me but to Firill.

Anti-materiel armor—Damascus 09P.

Clang—!

I used a small piece of armor plating to deflect the bullet sniping Firill between her eyes.

"Eh!?"

Seeing sparks scatter before her eyes, Firill was surprised.

"Don't worry, I'll end this soon."

To reassure Firill, I smiled at her gently.

"Oh... O-Okay."

Firill nodded, her cheeks reddening slightly.

Then I stepped forward and turned my gaze towards where the bullet came from.

He emerged from around a corner ahead.

The man wearing silver armor under a coat—Hreidmar. A hard luster could be seen under the hood. He was approaching us. As expected, Major Loki must have gotten news of Firill's dragon mark changing in color.

Yesterday, he had overwhelmed me, but for some reason, right now... I did not think I would lose.

There was no longer any hesitation in my heart. Killing him, changing myself, none of that mattered anymore.

Surely, it was because I was going to lose something very important next.

I feared forgetting, fearing to the point of not knowing what to do To think that I still had this much emotions of fear left in my heart.

Compared to this fear, compared to the fear of loss, mere change was nothing to be afraid of.

My consciousness was sharper and clearer than ever.

Behind me, Firill's breathing, the air currents around her, the sharp gazes directed in this direction from various places, the faint sounds of the waterfall far away, the flapping of birds' wings across the sky—

Including the sixth sense, all of my senses were expanding, filling my entire body with a sense of omnipotence as though I ruled the world.

"As long as I'm here, I won't allow you to touch a single hair of Firill's. If you come over, I will use killing methods to stop you."

I declared quietly while Hreidmar responded to me with killing intent.

As though replaying what happened yesterday, he threw a knife from within his coat without any preparatory motion.

But in my current state, I could easily predict his movements. The "Fafnir" surpassing him was controlling my body.

While twisting my body, I used my left hand to grab the hilt of the incoming knife.

Anti-armor weapon—Enlil.

Then using my empty right hand, I created a gun for taking down armored troops, firing a vibration bullet at him.

However, he predicted the bullet's trajectory, dodged the bullet and closed in on me.

I saw him pull out a black gun from inside his coat.

But before he could pull the trigger, I threw the knife at the muzzle.

As the gunshot rang out, an earsplitting metallic sound was heard all around

After clashing with the bullet, the knife spun up into the air.

Then came the next shot—the sound of Hreidmar's gunshot and mine overlapped.

Against his bullet, I used a vibration bullet this time. In my current state, taking his bullet trajectory into account was a piece of cake.

Then two impacts were heard. The first came from the vibration bullet deflecting his bullet. The second came from the vibration bullet, continuing straight to strike his gun.

The gun in Hreidmar's hand was sent flying. Transmitted to his body, the vibrations made him lose balance in his posture.

Without missing the opening, I fired the rest of Enlil's bullets at his body from point blank range.

The monotonous gunshots rang repeatedly.

Striking him, the vibration bullets ripped his coat and caused him to tilt backwards greatly.

An ordinary person would have fainted from the first hit. But despite having been hit by many bullets, he remained standing.

This was not something achievable through willpower or determination alone. Most likely, he had used highly refined martial arts to send most of the impacts to the ground.

But he could not be unharmed after all. For an instant, his movements halted.

That was enough. His life was in my hands now. The killing "Fafnir" did not let go of that opening. Opening its jaws, it buried its fangs into him.

Anti-materiel weapon—Ishtar.

I tossed Enlil away and used transmutation to create an anti-materiel rifle that was meant for sniping.

Goodbye, Hreidmar.

I bid him farewell in my thoughts.

I knew neither his true name, his appearance, nor his voice. But in my heart, I deeply carved the appearance of this man who was so strong that I used to watch him intently, the first human to be killed by me.

I pressed this large gun against Hreidmar's left chest and pulled the trigger without hesitation.

The heavy gunshot rumbled. The armor on his left chest was blown away as though exploding, but—

—Boom!

White smoke, resembling steam, shot out from inside the armored outfit with frightening force.

"Gah!?'

Finding my view obscured by the smoke, I let go of Ishtar and pulled away from Hreidmar. Perhaps I shot through a smoke grenade hidden on his body.

I definitely felt from my hand that I had shot him just now, but I still kept my distance from him, staying on guard against a counterattack until the smoke cleared.

In this quiet town at dawn, cold wind blew, revealing Hreidmar's figure.

He was lying on the ground, completely motionless.

Perhaps due to the explosion just now, the front of the armor had cracked wide open from inside.

"...?"

Feeling something was not right, I approached him cautiously, then—I saw that the armored outfit was empty.

"He... escaped?"

Witnessing that scene, I muttered. I did not sense anyone leaving in the smoke just now and judging from the crack in the armor, coming out from there was a bit difficult.

Nevertheless—I could not think of any other possibility apart from that. It was not like *the armor could have been empty from the start*.

Given it was Hreidmar, it would not be too surprising for him to retreat without me noticing. Since he had definitely suffered a severe injury, I should be able to conclude that he was routed.

"Phew.."

Although this was in hindsight, I breathed a slight sigh of relief that I could take care of things without killing anyone.

The only issue left was—

"Sleipnir! I know you guys are here!"

I yelled at the members of Sleipnir, watching me from various places with their presences concealed.

If I believed what John had said, they were in charge of surveillance and clean up, which was why they had not taken action so far. But I had no idea what orders they were given in the event that Hreidmar was defeated.

"Just as you can see, I defeated Hreidmar! You'd better take care of this thing and retreat!"

I indicated at Hreidmar's armored outfit with my arm then continued:

"If your target is also Firill, then I won't show any mercy. Bring it on if you feel like dying."

Saying that, I walked over to Firill.

"Mononobe-kun, thank you for protecting me, umm... You're very cool."

Staring at me in a slight trance, Firill thanked me.

"It's too early for thanks. The real battle is only beginning now."

Saying that, I started walking with Firill towards our destination, the waterfall.

Even if Sleipnir continued to observe without attacking, I still intended to eliminate their combat ability. In order to focus wholly on the battle against Hraesvelgr, I must get rid of all uncertain factors here.

I advanced without lowering my guard.

After walking for a while, I looked back. Hreidmar's armored outfit was gone and Sleipnir's presence had vanished.

It looked like they had retreated.

Then that left only one thing to do.

Namely, to put everything of mine on the line—to defeat "Yellow" Hraesvelgr, that was all.

Part 2

Chapter 4

The sun appeared from the eastern mountain range. The clouds in the sky turned from dark gray to the color of dawn. The rising sun's bright rays lengthened the shadows under our feet, adding rich colors to the large amount of river water flowing from the lake.

From the center of the plaza, some distance away, I watched the Great Waterfall of Erlia, rumbling today as before.

By my side were Firill, Mitsuki and Iris.

Lisa, Ariella, Ren and Tia were stationed on the edges of the plaza as though surrounding us.

Since the surrounding roads had been sealed off, there were no other people in sight.

"It will be soon."

Checking Firill's dragon mark whose color change was about to complete, Mitsuki murmured nervously. Since we were farther away from the waterfall than last time, it was possible to hear one another at normal speaking volume.

"Yeah..."

Time was drawing near—the moment to end "my current self" was about to arrive. Repeatedly replaying memories in my mind that I did not want to lose, I nodded at Mitsuki.

My memories with Mitsuki, things that had happened after coming to Midgard—If possible, I did not want to forget any of this.

"Don't worry, Mononobe."

Immediately, Iris made a look as though she understood everything and smiled at me.

Seeing her smile, I felt my shoulders relax a little. Indeed—No matter what I lost, Iris will surely remember it for me.

Seeing us gazing into each other's eyes, Mitsuki coughed lightly.

"Ahem, then let us confirm the plan now. After Hraesvelgr enters visual range, Nii-san will attack with the 'trump card' before it approaches. If Hraesvelgr cannot be defeated completely, everyone will join into attack—Is this sequence correct?"

"Yes."

"Then one more thing. If this plan fails, then what?"

Mitsuki asked me, as well as Firill who was sitting on a bench in the plaza.

"Well..."

I was speechless for a moment. Unlike last time with Iris, Mitsuki had not pleaded with me, "it would be better to kill her rather than let her become a dragon." In the event that the worst-case scenario arrived, what did Firill hope to do—I still did not know.

I looked at Firill. Exhaling lightly, she answered.

"...I don't want to die."

"Firill-san, are you fine with turning into a dragon?"

Mitsuki asked in a cautious tone.

"Frankly speaking, I do feel that becoming a dragon is slightly better than dying. However—Mitsuki, and Lisa too, you probably won't allow it, right?"

"....."

Mitsuki replied with silence and a pained expression.

"Hence, rather than making you suffer that kind of pain from killing me, I'd rather end my own life. Although I don't want to die... I'd hate for things to end up like with Miyako, forcing you and the others to suffer all this time."

Shinomiya Miyako was Mitsuki's best friend who had caught the Kraken's eye and got turned into a dragon. Due to guilt from killing Miyako personally, Mitsuki had suffered deeply the whole time. Defeating all dragons was one of her ways of atonement.

Probably because she had watched Mitsuki suffer since a long time ago, Firill took out a combat knife from her coat's inside pocket.

"That's Hreidmar's—"

I was surprised to see the knife Firill was holding. After I used Hreidmar's knife to block a bullet, I had no idea where it had flown off.

"I picked it up just now."

Firill smiled wryly and ran her fingertips along the back of the blade.

I reflexively reached out, trying to take the knife from her hand, but—seeing the light of resolve in her eyes, I stopped.

"I absolutely won't let you use that thing."

I clenched my fist and slowly lowered my hand. As though squeezing my voice out, I told her.

"...Yes."

Firill gripped the knife's hilt tightly and nodded.

"Ah—"

At this moment, she showed a painful expression.

"Firill-chan, what's wrong?"

Iris frantically asked her. Firill groaned while pressing her hand on her shoulder's dragon mark.

"...It's hot."

"S-Show me!"

Mitsuki frantically pulled her collar to check the dragon mark on her shoulder, only to see the mark glow with yellow radiance completely beyond what it was earlier.

"The dragon mark has changed in color completely. Nii-san, Hraesvelgr is coming."

Mitsuki reported to me then raised her hand to signal to everyone in the corners of the plaza.

Hence, Lisa and the others summoned their fictional armaments and looked at the sky.

"Iris, I'm counting on you."

I looked up at the cloudy sky and extended my hand towards Iris.

Although it was unknown what kind of data I could obtain from Yggdrasil, assuming similar specs as the anti-dragon weapons I had used before, materializing it would definitely require borrowing dark matter from someone else.

Since Firill must act appropriately at the critical moment, I had asked Iris to be in charge of supplying me with dark matter.

However, Iris stared at my hand then shook her head to refuse.

"Mononobe, I feel that it's better for Mitsuki-chan to do it this time."

"Huh?"

"Mitsuki-chan, even while transferring dark matter, you can still give orders to everyone, right? So please, could you take my place?"

Without waiting for my answer, Iris said to Mitsuki.

"Why so suddenly—"

"Please, if it's with you, Mitsuki-chan, it'll definitely succeed!"

Seeing Iris so serious, Mitsuki reluctantly nodded.

"If you say so... Fine. Then please go to Firill-san's side and accompany her, Iris-san."

Mitsuki held my left hand lightly with her right.

Since I had grown taller, Mitsuki's hand felt smaller compared to when we were young.

Just by holding hands, many memories awakened in a chain reaction. This was proof of the times Mitsuki and I had spent together.

Even if some memories had already been forgotten, we shared many many memories, connecting us together as family.

She was always playing the role of the warmth closest to me, the voice most familiar to my ears.

With just that, I felt I could face any trial, no matter what, but—

Iris had yield the spot by my side to Mitsuki. Feeling curious about her true thoughts, I looked at Iris.

Meeting my gaze, Iris showed a melancholic smile and nodded slightly at me.

"Do your best, Mononobe. As long as you hold hands, you won't lose it, right?"

"Iris..."

Iris probably asked Mitsuki to switch so that I would forget the least about Mitsuki.

Feeling her thoughts and wishes, I shifted my gaze back into the sky.

—Thank you.

Even without holding hands, I could still strongly feel the bond between Iris and me. I absolutely won't forget the sensation lingering on my lips.

"Right now, Nii-san... You feel exactly the same as three years ago."

Immediately, Mitsuki showed uneasiness in her gaze, looking at the side of my face while I was staring at the sky.

"—You're thinking too much. There's no need to make such a worried look. Leave it to me."

I felt guilty inside but I answered forcefully.

However, Mitsuki's expression stiffened further.

"It is identical just as I suspected. Back then also, Nii-san, after you suddenly said leave it to you... Hekatonkheir was driven away. Afterwards, Nii-san, you disappeared."

After speaking in a trembling voice, Mitsuki gripped my hand tighter.

"Nii-san... You are not going to disappear again, are you?"

"No, I want to stay by your side forever, Mitsuki. That's why—You have to hold onto me tightly."

The sun was clearly still at the mountain's edge but another part of the clouds in the sky suddenly brightened.

It was coming...!

Noticing Hraesvelgr's arrival, I closed my eyes and called to Yggdrasil in my mind.

Lend me your power, Yggdrasil! Lend me the power to defeat Hraesvelgr!

—Demand acknowledged, data transfer restarting.

As though it had been waiting for my call all along, Yggdrasil's emotionless voice replied immediately.

Some part of my consciousness connected to it and a vast volume of data flowed in.

"Gah..."

My brain screamed. The internal pressure from the information flowing in was twisting my heart and soul.

My thoughts were in chaos. My emotions were devoured.

Memories—gradually getting distant.

The more information that flowed in, the more I lost in return.

It felt like being forced to watch a movie fast forwarded at several hundred times the speed without allowing my gaze to shift, engraving everything onto my mind.

My accumulated past was gradually collapsing, as though pushed out by the newly written information.

However, I did not know what I was losing. The instant something left me, I had already forgotten what it was.

Even the sense of loss making me want to scream loudly was being engulfed by the flood of information, to the point that even wanting to feel sad was not allowed.

The incoming data was like a tree's roots, gradually invading the deepest layer of my consciousness.

The existence in my mind that was not myself was gradually increasing in proportion.

Enduring that unpleasant feeling of a foreign object, I searched for the information I needed.

Having lost the foundation known as memories, I desperately kept my unstable personality together and dove into the sea of information.

Faced with Hraesvelgr which was immune to all sorts of physical interference, I sought a weapon capable of dealing with that dragon effectively.

Beneath my eyelids, numerous lights kept flashing.

Soul, spirit—I kept searching weapons data, among them included armaments that the modern world would view as occult concepts.

—Match found, anti-dragon weapon Marduk, auxiliary armament.

I heard Yggdrasil's voice in my mind.

Then gradually supplementing the data of the still incomplete Marduk, I looked for the potential to breakthrough the current predicament.

Disconnect!

The instant I obtained the necessary weapon information, I raised my mental defenses to prevent more data from flowing in.

Severing Yggdrasil's circuits, I was liberated from the pressure of information.

Chapter 4

My name is—Mononobe Yuu.

Confirming my own name, I opened my eyes and swept my gaze in a circle.

Scattered in the corners of the plaza, the girls wielding fictional armaments—Tia, Lisa, Ariella, Ren—I remembered all their names.

Behind me, holding a knife, watching the battle silently was the princess from the Principaliy of Erlia—Firill. By her side, watching me worriedly was Iris.

Then right now, the girl holding hands with me, I clearly recognized her name was Mitsuki.

However—

"Ah..."

I could not help but cry out.

"Nii-san?"

Mitsuki looked at me, her expression seemed to be asking "What is the matter?"

"N-Nothing."

Despite feeling a vague outline of what I had lost, I still shifted my gaze back to the sky.

Since I had not forgotten the reason for fighting, I should focus my attention on the opponent that needed to be taken out, not think about unnecessary things for now.

But why did I feel so unsettled? Clearly Mitsuki and I... were holding each other's hand.

That cold omen was putting me at a loss what to do. At this moment, I saw the golden light flying in. A brightly shining giant bird appeared, breaking past the clouds. The instant I saw that bird, I dispelled all unnecessary thoughts.

The yellow dragon—"Yellow" Hraesvelgr.

It was the dragon in pursuit of Firill, as well as the enemy that must be defeated.

And now, the method to defeat it was already in my mind.

I had probably obtained it in exchange for something irreplaceable.

Borrowing Mitsuki's dark matter, I constructed the lost weapon for slaughtering that dragon.

"Marduk... Psionic multi-barreled cannon, Noah!"

Pitch-black dark matter was gradually transmuted into a pre-civilization weapon.

On a rotating turret, the double-barreled artillery took on physical form. Since it was a size smaller than the previous weapons, Noah was almost in a complete state after I constructed it.

The multi-barreled design had glowing lines carved on the surface. Moving according to my will, it aimed at Hraesvelgr.

All previous anti-dragon weapons were controlled by a mental link, but I felt an even stronger connection to this multi-barreled cannon.

The vitality inside my body was gradually sucked away by Noah.

Reading the downloaded information, I gradually understood what kind of weapon it was.

The inventors of this weapon had discovered tiny quantities of particles in the atmosphere that interacted with souls—namely, what we now called ether—then apparently found applications for it.

Noah, the Ark going through to the Far Beyond, was a weapon for amplifying and firing the gunner's thoughts. After being compressed to high density, mental waves could cause a slight amount of ether to materialize, thereby obtaining the power to interact physically—

I did not know whether the inventors created this weapon with something like Hraesvelgr as an imaginary enemy. However, since it used mental energy, there was a high chance that it could interfere with Hraesvelgr's spirit body.

Considering this weapon's characteristics, I could predict that the higher the density of ether, the more powerful the shots.

Golden particles were starting to drift down like snow.

I aimed at the source of those particles—Hraesvelgr descending in a straight line—and fired my own spirit.

"—Fire!"

The double-barreled cannon fired shells of light at the same time.

When confronted with positron blasts and antimatter projectiles, Hraesvelgr made no effort to dodge, but now, it flapped its wings hard and halted rapidly in the air.

Most likely, it instinctively detected danger.

However, Hraesvelgr's evasive action was not fast enough. Out of the two shots, one struck the edge of its wing.

Golden feathers scattered.

"...It's working!"

Iris cheered.

But Hraesvelgr regrouped in the air and switched to flying in a spiral.

Although I hit the target and had inflicted damage, it was quite far from a critical wound.

Then I just had to keep firing until I ran out of energy.

Rotating the turret to track the flying Hraesvelgr, I fired consecutively.

"Crash down!!"

I understood that my fatigue would gradually accumulate with the firing of each shell of light. The shells' source was my thoughts—mental energy. The more I fired, the power known as fighting spirit or mental energy, which supported the mind, would gradually deplete.

Hraesvelgr was turning rapidly in the air above the waterfall, dodging the multi-barreled cannon.

I could not hit again, the number of attacks were not enough.

Hraesvelgr was steadily decreasing its altitude. Fluttering in the surroundings, the golden particles were gradually increasing in concentration. If it approached a bit closer, we would probably get enveloped in particles again and lose our ability to move.

In that case—

"Please, Iris, give me your dark matter too!"

Without looking back, I extended my empty right hand backwards.

Since Mitsuki's dark matter was continually converted into energy to drive the turret, I needed Iris' help *to create another turret*.

"G-Got it!"

Iris gripped my right palm with her warm hand, filling my heart with power—Her dark matter flowed into me.

"Noah—second turret!"

I continued to fire at Hraesvelgr while simultaneously constructing a second psionic multi-barreled cannon next to me.

This strained my mind heavily, making me dizzy.

However, using willpower, I maintained my consciousness that was about to cut off, then I stared at Hraesvelgr in the sky.

"FIRE!!"

The first turret's shells were fired as though chasing Hraesvelgr while the second turret's shells were fired as though blocking the direction of its advance.

Nevertheless, Hraesvelgr twisted its body nimbly. The shells merely brushed past its wings.

—Strike!!

I gritted my teeth and continued to fire consecutively.

I fired nonstop at the light of souls in the sky, but this was still not enough.

The shells brushed past Hraesvelgr's body many times, but were off by a sliver. None were direct hits.

The particles in the surroundings were getting more concentrated. The time limit was at hand.

At this rate, we were not going to make it.

"Firill too... Please!"

I made a final gamble. Although my brain might short circuit, there was no other choice left.

"Eh, b-but... in the critical moment, I need to take my own—"

"Forget about later! If you fight as hard you can now, perhaps there will be a way! If you want to live—lend me your strength!"

"......Okay!"

Clang, the knife fell to the ground. Firill hugged me from behind.

I could feel a voluptuous and soft sensation on my back. Her dark matter also flowed into me.

Normally speaking, I could not possibly handle dark matter from three people, but since weapon blueprints served as an unerring filter, I was able to control and transmute Firill's dark matter as well through this filter.

"Noah—T.H.I.R.D. T.U.R.R.E.T!!"

I had long passed the limit of my processing power. My brain screamed. My head felt like it was going to explode from inside.

However, I gritted my teeth as though trying to grind my teeth to dust, squeezing out power beyond my limit.

The third psionic multi-barreled cannon was gradually constructed. I felt blood dripping from my nose.

Even so, I still clung forcibly to my consciousness, locking on the target with my blurry eyes, firing three multi-barreled cannons at the same time.

"FIRE!!"

Hraesvelgr tried to turn rapidly in a panic, but this time, it was cornered.

Two of the six shots struck directly. The giant golden bird lost balance completely.

—Now victory is decided!

"Fire, fire, fire, fire—!!"

I mustered all my strength, turning the will to vanquish that dragon into ammunition, firing consecutively with the three Noahs.

With every impact, golden particles would scatter, gradually thinning out Hraesvelgr's coating of light.

If Hraesvelgr existed and lived in this world, it must possess a living physical body. The power to manifest souls must also be used while in a living state. This was a matter-of-fact principle.

The coating of light was most likely Hraesvelgr's own spirit. Unlike humans whose spirit was contained within the body of flesh, Hraesvelgr's spirit must be large enough to envelop its physical body.

And that coating of light was gradually getting peeled off. The shells fired by me were shaving off and scattering the giant bird's spirit.

Beneath the outer coating that neutralized all kinds of attacks, what existed were yellow rather than golden feathers.

"If it's now, I think everyone's attacks might work! Mitsuki, give the signal to attack!"

I kept firing the cannons while speaking to Mitsuki.

"Y-Yes, roger that! Everyone—please attack!"

Mitsuki raised her left hand then swung it down forcefully. This was the signal to start attacking.

Stationed in a formation around the plaza, Lisa and the others fired at the sky with their fictional armaments.

Due to my attacks, Hraesvelgr was almost entirely stripped of its coating of light. Everyone's attacks were striking Hraesvelgr directly.

—Kuahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!

Hraesvelgr cried out in pain. What fluttered in the air were not particles but real feathers.

Losing a wing, Hraesvelgr crashed down towards the waterfall.

Controlling three turrets, I aimed and poured the last of my strength into them, converting it into energy for Noah.

"—FIRE!!"

Dazzling light erupted from the muzzles, firing shells that were several times larger than earlier.

The six spheres of light sank straight into Hraesvelgr's body.

Immediately, a gigantic explosion swallowed Hraesvelgr.

Golden particles were then scattered by the blast pressure.

"!"

I closed my eyes for an instant. When I opened them again, the giant golden bird had vanished.

Yellow feathers and shining particles were falling from the air like snow.

Even after looking around the sky, I could not see any signs of Hraesvelgr.

Victory...?

I could not hear the giant bird's calls or the flapping of its wings. The only noise was the sound of the waterfall.

"...We defeate it?"

Gripping my right hand tightly, Iris asked.

"Yes—It looks like we won."

Mitsuki murmured in a daze.

Scattered around the plaza, everyone cheered and ran towards us.

Seeing this, I finally felt a real sense of victory.

I was utterly exhausted. My vision kept swaying.

But for just a bit longer... At least until everyone returned, I tried hard to stay standing.

"Ah—"

Separating from my back, Firill exclaimed in surprise.

"...What's the matter?"

I asked in my hazy consciousness.

"Grandfather seemed to be there just now..."

I looked at where her finger was pointing, but could only see golden particles that gradually faded and disappeared.

"Oh... Never mind, sorry, I guess I imagined it."

Firill smiled wryly and shook her head.

"No... It's possible that the souls absorbed by Hraesvelgr were finally freed. If you have any words to convey... How about using this chance to say them?"

I encouraged Firill and she nodded.

"yeah, if Grandfather really is present... I must convey this to him."

She turned her gaze towards the spot where she could vaguely see her grandfather.

Ahhh—No good. My consciousness... already—

Then my vision dimmed and the surrounding noise gradually faded into the distance.

"...Thank you."

The last thing I heard was Firill's word of thanks that took all her strength to speak.

Part 3

"Good work, Yuu."

Not far from the waterfall's observation plaza, on a rooftop, Kili Surtr Muspelheim spoke softly.

Kili had sneaked out of the palace and witnessed everything. Watching Mononobe from a distance while he lost consciousness and was looked after, she smiled.

Targeted by NIFL, although she was ordered to standby in the palace, she had no reason to obey such an order. A bit of danger was nothing if it meant she could watch him fight.

"Hey! You bitch! Hurry and untie this rope!"

An angry voice shouted from underfoot. Kili looked down with an expression of distaste. Under her was the Sleipnir sniper all tied up in rope—John Hortensia.

"Shut up and give me some peace."

Kili glared at the soldier and immediately generated dark matter next to John's mouth, transmuting a ball gag.

"Ooh, ooh!"

Unable to speak, John moaned while squirming pointlessly.

"Listen here, let me make this clear... I saved you, got that? Had you sniped her, then right now, you'd have been killed by him."

Kili glanced at the sniper's rifle fallen on the ground next to the roof, then sighed deeply.

Ignoring Mononobe Yuu's warning, John still attempted to snipe Firill from here, probably as a precaution in case Hraesvelgr could not be defeated.

Nevertheless, Yuu had easily defeated Hreidmar. Given the way he was right now, he would have sensed John's presence as soon as he entered sniping posture, then eliminated the enemy mercilessly.

It would be huge mistake to think that Yuu would present openings when fighting Hraesvelgr. Precisely because he had no slack to spare, he was not going to show any mercy and would surely blast John to death with that cannon.

"Mm~!"

"Dear me, what a scary look, however, indeed... I only saved you and that girl out of convenience. Because I have questions for you."

"Mm~!"

"—What on earth is Hreidmar?"

As soon as Kili asked that, John instantly stopped moaning. Fear surfaced on his face and he began to tremble.

"From the way you look, you apparently saw his true identity."

"....."

John's silence was equivalent to answering yes.

"Your commanding officer is the one who gives orders to it, right? What kind of person is that guy? What does he intend to do to my Yuu?"

John frowned and shook his head once.

"Mmmm~!"

He seemed to be moaning like complaining.

"—Fufu, your face looks like you're saying 'Yuu is not yours.' Are you jealous?"

"Mmguu~!"

John went red to his ears while his bound body kept struggling.

"Fufu, what a cute reaction. Let me give you some honest advice since I like you a bit. If you know nothing about Hreidmar, it means that it is something your position is not allowed to know, yet.. through that pair of eyes, too excellent for your own good, you saw."

John made a stiff expression. Kili looked at him with eyes of pity.

"Under such circumstances, what you face next is most likely an unfortunate ending. I sincerely suggest that you don't return to your commanding officer."

"....."

John looked away and remained silent.

"Oh my oh my, look at your lost expression. The way I see it, apart from NIFL, you have no place to go. No helping it—Then I shall kidnap you."

John widened his eyes and showed a look of surprise.

"Because it's been so lively these recent days... I'd feel a bit lonely if I go back to being alone. Since we're both people without a place to belong to, aren't we perfect travel companions?"

"Mm~!"

John shook his head with all his strength to refuse.

"You hate it that much? Even if I say that it's for Yuu's sake?"

"...?"

John's gaze seemed to be asking Kili "What do you mean by that?"

"Because through this incident, I can be certain that he is being watched by multiple unidentified existences apart from your commanding officer. At this rate, something will take him away."

Kili's eyes flashed with the light of insanity.

"I would hate that. The same goes for you, right?"

"....."

"So, before our mutual enemies are eliminated, let's cooperate, shall we? If you want to kill me, save it for after that, okay?"

Smiling cheerfully, Kili took the ball gag off John.

"So, may I ask you to introduce yourself? Although other people seem to call you John, you must have a real name, right? Little lady?"

John showed extreme unease in response to the question. However, she finally answered in a quiet voice.

"...Jeanne."

"A name that suits you very well, noble and courageous—And very unfortunate, I might add."

Kili chuckled and bent down to use her finger to stroke the cheek of the scowling maiden—

Epilogue

Purururururu—

I woke up from the ringing of my portable terminal to find myself in the room assigned to me in the palace. I reached out, found my portable terminal next to the pillow and looked at the screen.

It was 7pm, more than twelve hours after the battle against Hraesvelgr. The current caller was displayed as unknown, but I had a good idea who it was.

Lying on the bed, I pressed the call button while looking up. Immediately, Major Loki's face appeared on the screen.

'—You finally picked up. You look like you just woke up, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe.'

"Yes... If possible, I wanted to sleep even longer."

Due to creating three sets of anti-dragon weapons and the ammunition was mental energy, I still had not recovered completely from exhaustion.

'Then I'm terribly sorry, but first, let me congratulate your victory. Congratulations, you defeated that Hraesvelgr. Your accomplishment and contribution to mankind is too great to describe with words.'

"I can't believe you can still say that when you clearly sent Hreidmar to kill Firill."

I frowned and retorted sarcastically.

'Really? I believe it was the appropriate decision. Leaving important cases to even more capable people, isn't that obvious? It's wonderful that you're more capable than Hreidmar as a soldier.'

"....."

Same as always, this man never changed.

No matter what developments fate had in store, he would have countermeasures prepared, never letting an unfavorable outcome happen.

'Putting that aside, if you just woke up, let me be the one to tell you. Midgard called to inform me that Kili Surtr Muspelheim has gone missing. Unfortunately, your original mission has ended in failure.'

"Well, I sort of expected that."

I simply sighed, not too surprised. As soon as it came to light that Hraesvelgr's target was Firill and not Kili, there was no benefit for her to keep staying with us.

'One more thing, a member of my Sleipnir team—Sergeant John Hortensia—has gone missing too. Judging from the situation, chances of being kidnapped by Kili are very high.'

"What..."

This time, I could not help exclaiming in surprise. It was completely unexpected news.

Why would Kili kidnap John—

'Actually, my original purpose was to ask you about this—But there's no point asking you when you just woke up. If you happen to come across news on Sergeant John, I hope you'll tell me.'

"...Sure."

Despite giving my word, I was still thinking inside. If I really found out John's whereabouts, was passing that info to Major Loki really the right thing to do? I knew nothing about what Major Loki was thinking. Compared to Kili who had told me her true identity, Major Loki was more of an unidentified existence.

'That is what I wanted to talk to you about.'

"Hold on, can I ask a question before we end?"

'...What question?'

Major Loki narrowed his eyes to urge me to continue.

"Major Loki, you said you'd use this chance to make me complete... Did you achieve that goal?"

'No. About that, the obtained results was not as expected. Despite proving that your abilities are higher than Hreidmar's, you are still the incomplete "Fafnir." I sensed faintly in the beginning that something inside you is in the way.'

"Something... in the way?"

Major Loki looked at me sharply. Cold sweat slid down my cheek.

'However—perhaps the matter of being in the way goes both ways.'

Major Loki's tone sounded like he was talking to someone apart from me. Then the call disconnected.

I tossed the portable terminal on the bed and exhaled deeeply.

Listening to him always put me ill at ease.

—Click.

Inside the quiet room, I heard the door open.

"...Mononobe-kun?"

Firill entered the room in a formal dress. Switching on the light, she walked towards me.

"So you woke up. I heard voices... But there's no one else here."

Feeling puzzled, Firill looked around the room.

"I was taking a call on my terminal. It was the ringing that woke me up."

I sat up and answered her.

"...I see now. But thank goodness, until just now, all of us were taking turns to look after you. Mononobe-kun, everyone is eating dinner right now, but I returned early because I didn't have much appetite."

Showing a relief expression, Firill sat down on the bed.

"Sorry for worrying you, but I'm fine now."

To be honest, there was some fatigue that needed to recover, but not enough to affect my movement.

"I'm the one who needs to apologize, sorry... You strained yourself so much for my sake."

Firill rested her hand on my cheek and looked up at me.

"No, I wasn't the only one trying hard. You lent your power to me, Firill, and without support from Lisa and the rest, we might not have struck down Hraesvelgr completely. Then it would have broke past our defensive line."

"Even so... You're still the one who protected me, Mononobe-kun, thank you."

Saying that, Firill brought her knee on the bed and approached me.

"Eh? W-Wait—"

"I won't wait, Mononobe-kun, because you protected me one-sidedly, I will take revenge one-sidedly too."

Firill wrapped her arms around the back of my head and pulled me towards her.

"!?"

My face was buried in the cleavage of her voluptuous bust while she hugged my head tightly.

"You enjoy this, don't you, Mononobe-kun? You were so happy at the hot spring..."

"~~~~!!"

I could not make a sound due to Firill's soft bosom covering up my face. A girl's fragrant scent was tickling my nose lightly. My mind began to go hazy.

"Last time was only three seconds, but today... No, from now on, there's no time limit."

A gentle voice caressed my ear. I felt my nervousness and confusion gradually subside.

"Also, what I said before... Doesn't count."

"?"

Not knowing what she was referring to, I frowned.

"Although I said you're not allowed to fall in love with me unless you have the resolve... I take it back. You may fall in love with me... Mononobe-kun."

"—!?"

Hearing her gentle whispers next to me, I could not help but panic and moved my face.

"Ah... Mm... It tickles when you move like that."

The restraints relaxed slightly. I withdrew my head from Firill's bosom and took a deep breath.

"Puha!"

"Mononobe-kun, is this enough?"

Firill cocked her head in disappointment and asked me.

"E-Enough! Besides—What you just said..."

I answered hoarsely, peering at her face.

What she just said was making my heart beat faster than the act of hugging my head.

"Regarding resolve?"

"Yeah..."

I nodded, only to see Firill smile with a blush.

"Because even without resolve, Mononobe-kun... You're already my prince."

"P-Prince?"

"You make my heart flutter, Mononobe-kun, so if you... could fall in love with me, I'd be very glad."

"——"

Her dazzling smile mesmerized me for a moment.

Click.

Then I heard the door open again.

"W-What do you think you two are doing!?"

I looked back to see the members of Brynhildr Class staring at us with their faces red. They had probably just returned from dinner. Standing in front, Lisa pointed at us while her gaze wandered.

"No, this is—"

I frantically tried to separate from Firill. Just as I was looking for an excuse—

"I've proposed to Mononobe-kun."

—However, Firill's voice drowned out what I said.

"What..."

Lisa was rendered speechless. Standing behind her, Ariella and Ren's faces turned even redder.

Tia pushed them apart and rushed forward.

"N-No! Tia will make Yuu fall in love with Tia, then marry Tia!"

Tia jumped on the bed, trying to pull Firill who was pressed tightly against me.

"M-Mononobe... Are you going to marry Firill?"

Iris approached timidly and looked at me with a sorrowful expression.

"You two want to marry Mononobe-kun too?"

Firill cocked her head and asked Tia and Iris.

"Yes!"

"Eh, I-I... umm..."

Tia nodded and admitted without hesitation whereas Iris blushed and looked away.

Seeing this, Firill clapped her hands together.

"In that case, I've got a good solution."

"Good solution?"

Tia widened her eyes and asked.

"Yes... Let me tell you, the Principality of Erlia here recognizes same-sex marriage."

"W-Wow—they're very open-minded."

Despite feeling confused, Iris concurred.

"But only members of the royal family are allowed to have polygamy... It's an ancient law that still remains."

Despite modern times, certain countries still maintained systems of polygyny to prevent the royal bloodline from going extinct. Disregarding whether people actually use it in practice, it was not surprising for such rules to exist.

But I felt confused. What exactly was Firill trying to say?

"So... If I marry all of you, all problems are solved."

"Huh...?"

Apart from Firill, everyone's jaw dropped.

"Whether Mononobe-kun, Iris or Tia, we'll be one family. If necessary, I don't mind adding more. Don't you think this solution is great?"

"Tia can become your family?"

Tia asked, apparently interested.

"W-Wait, Tia! I thought about it a bit more, but that means Firill-chan will be the only one married to Mononobe!"

Iris suddenly realized and hurried to stop Tia.

"Ah, Firill is so sly! Then Tia isn't Mononobe's wife either!"

"Fufufu, I got found out."

Firill smiled mischievously and shrugged.

"—Stop it with this nonsense. Nii-san just woke up at last, right?"

At this time, Mitsuki's sharp voice was heard.

Ariella and the others parted to make a path and I heard Mitsuki's footsteps approach.

She was Midgard's student body president, captain of the Counter-Dragon Squad and also—my step-sister.

I knew this much information and knowledge. I had not forgotten. We lived in the same dorm, ate breakfast and dinner together, fought against powerful dragons together, these memories were intact, but—

"...Nii-san?"

Mitsuki showed a worried look. Seeing me in a daze, she reached out to touch my forehead.

A cold little hand with a girl's delicate fingers. Apart from that, I could not feel anything else.

I felt a bit nervous to be touched by others.

"Seems like—No fever. Are you hungry? If you have an appetite, I could ask them to bring food over."

"No, it's okay, I don't feel like eating right now."

Hearing the stiff voice from my throat, I was shocked.

No good... Wrong.

I did not use this kind of voice to talk to Mitsuki in the past.

Feeling the difference was too great, I decided that talking to Mitsuki now would be bad.

"Really, then even if it is only drinks—"

"Thanks, Mitsuki, but I still want to rest more. Let me have some peace and quiet alone for now."

I anxiously cut her off.

"O-Okay—As you wish."

I could not help but speak forcefully. Mitsuki's shoulders shook for an instant, then she nodded and agreed.

No good... This was no good.

But even though I realized the dissonance, I did not know how to interact correctly.

"Mononobe...?"

Iris watched me with worry.

At Mitsuki's urging, everyone left the room. Iris' gaze remained on me the whole time.

Slam.

As soon as the door shut, I instantly jumped out of bed and locked it. Then I rushed to the window and came to the balcony facing the courtyard.

"Huff, huff, huff..."

My chest was hurting, my heart was in pain. In this situation, she was the only one I could rely on.

With a bit of a running start, I jumped to the adjacent balcony. Then I opened the window at once and rushed into Iris' room. Having just returned, she stared at me with widened eyes.

"Mononobe?"

"—Iris!"

I rushed to her and grabbed her delicate shoulders forcefully.

"I beg, tell me! Tell me about Mononobe Mitsuki... Please!"

"C-Calm down, Mononobe—I-It hurts..."

"Oh... S-Sorry."

I apologized stiffly to her and relaxed my grip. Iris held my hands in hers and asked me worriedly:

"Mononobe, what did you forget? Don't tell me... you actually forgot me too?"

I gritted my teeth and shook my head.

"No, I didn't forget you, Iris. I can still remember the second kiss clearly."

"That's a relief, then what did you forget—"

"...All the memories from my birth up to three years ago."

I stated what I had lost.

"—Eh?"

"I can clearly recall my memories from NIFL and Midgard but everything before that has gone fuzzy. Even if I trace back using knowledge that should've been acquired at the time, I cannot find any memories."

"No way..."

Mitsuki went pale in shock while I smiled in self-deprecation to her.

"I don't know what kind of little sister Mitsuki is. I not only forgot the Mitsuki before we became siblings, this time, I even forgot the Mitsuki after she became my little sister."

"Mononobe..."

Iris looked at me with tears welling up in her eyes while I confided in her.

"Even when I look at Mitsuki, I don't get the feeling she is my sister. Even when she touches me with her hand, I don't feel reassured, I... I'm no longer—Mitsuki's family, even."

"...Don't worry, don't worry!"

Iris hugged me tightly and said:

"Mononobe, you're still Mitsuki-chan's brother! Because you're feeling this much pain and suffering! You wouldn't feel so tormented because of her if she wasn't family!"

"Iris... But I—"

"Don't worry, because I remember! Mononobe, you told me memories about Mitsuki-chan—I haven't forgotten a single one! I will tell you everything... So stop saying you're not Mitsuki-chan's family."

Iris caressed my back and spoke earnestly to me.

"......Thank you."

I clenched my fist and voiced my gratitude.

Seeing I had calmed down, Iris released me gently. Then she spoke with determination I had never heard before:

"Mononobe, don't worry, I will find a way."

Iris stared straight into my eyes.

"Right now... For the very first time in my life, I am truly angry. This thing that has harmed you in this way—This Yggdrasil that has stolen your precious memories, I hate it to death!"

Iris' clear eyes were burning with flames of fervor.

"Hold on, Iris, Yggdrasil is—"

I wanted to refute her, but she interrupted me in a strong tone of voice.

"—I know, Yggdrasil is helping us to defeat other dragons. It's thanks to it that I can stand here and we were able to protect Firill-chan, but..."

Epilogue

Clenching her tiny fist, she declared with acute hostility:

"I will definitely retrieve your memories—even if it means defeating Yggdrasil."

彼女は小さな拳を握りしめ、鋭い敵意を込めて、こう宣言した。
「あたしは、絶対にモノノベの記憶を取り戻す。ユグドラシルを――倒してでも」

Afterword

This is Tsukasa. *Unlimited Fafnir* has finally reached Volume 4. This time, the story leaves Midgard and takes place in Firill's homeland.

From tropical Midgard to the Principality of Erlia in the chilly highlands—

For someone who fears the cold like me, it's quite an ordeal.

And who knows if there's any cause and effect, but shortly before I wrote this afterword, there was record snowfall in Tokyo.

It was my first time experiencing dozens of centimeters of snow accumulated. That day, I stayed home and spent the day peacefully.

I'm filled with fear when I think about snowfall in the north which dwarfs this.

Then thinking about all the people working in snow removal for our sake, I'm inspired with strong feelings of respect...

—Oh, I'm afraid I might use up my page count if I continue this topic, so let's get back to the point.

What I want to say is that the writing process for this volume felt quite smooth because the weather matched reality. Sure enough, trying to write a summer story during cold weather, to immerse my imagination into that kind of world, would inevitably take more time.

But after getting into the story, the outside temperature would no longer matter, so I don't think there's any difference in story quality. But in terms of writing speed, I think it'll be faster if the weather in the plot matches what's going on in real life. Or perhaps the amount of time needed to switch mindsets is different.

Although it's only a feeling without any evidence... I think it's true based on experience.

Speaking of experience, this Unlimited Fafnir Volume 4 is already my twenty-first book published as a writer. Emotionally, I still think of myself as a newbie so it feels quite incredible.

Afterword

It's all thanks to all the readers' support that I can continue writing as a career. I'm truly thankful to you all.

Then thanks to everyone, *Unlimited Fafnir* is now getting a manga adaptation.

And at the back of this Volume 4, even the prologue of the manga serialization will be included.

I've already seen the storyboards for the prologue and the first chapter. It feels very intense and awesome. More importantly, it's a great read, making me so impressed. A manga's expressive power is really amazing.

The manga definitely has a charm that prose cannot fully describe. By the time I realized, I was already enjoying the manga version from a reader's standpoint.

I will work hard too and not lose to the manga version.

This is my first time cooperating across different media. I'm looking forward to it with great excitement.

I heard that it will be serialized in *Good! Afternoon* magazine. I hope all of you will support it, dear readers.

Then next, let's start the acknowledgements.

Korie Riko-sensei, Iris and all the girls are super cute again! Especially in their formal dresses, they're so attractive. Just seeing them fills me with happiness. I'm so grateful that you're always drawing such lovely illustrations for this story.

Editor in charge, Shouji-sama, thanks to your rapid responses every time, I'm able to finish the story to a satisfactory degree without rushing. The errors you point out always enlighten me in awe. I'm really grateful to you. Please continue to look after me.

Next, I will express the greatest thanks to all the readers once again.

Next volume is finally(?) set to focus on Lisa, please look forward to it.

Well then, see you next time.

Afterword

Tsukasa, February 2014

Illustrator’s Afterword

Unlimited Fafnir Volume 4!

How does everyone feel about it?

I'm so happy to be able to draw all the girls in formal dresses.

Then I'd really like to bury my face in Firill-chan's bosom.

Korie Riko

あとがき

ファフニール4巻！
いかがでしたか？
みんなのドレス姿が描けて
楽しかったですー♪

そしてフィリルちゃんの胸に顔を
埋めたいと思いました◎

柚木桃